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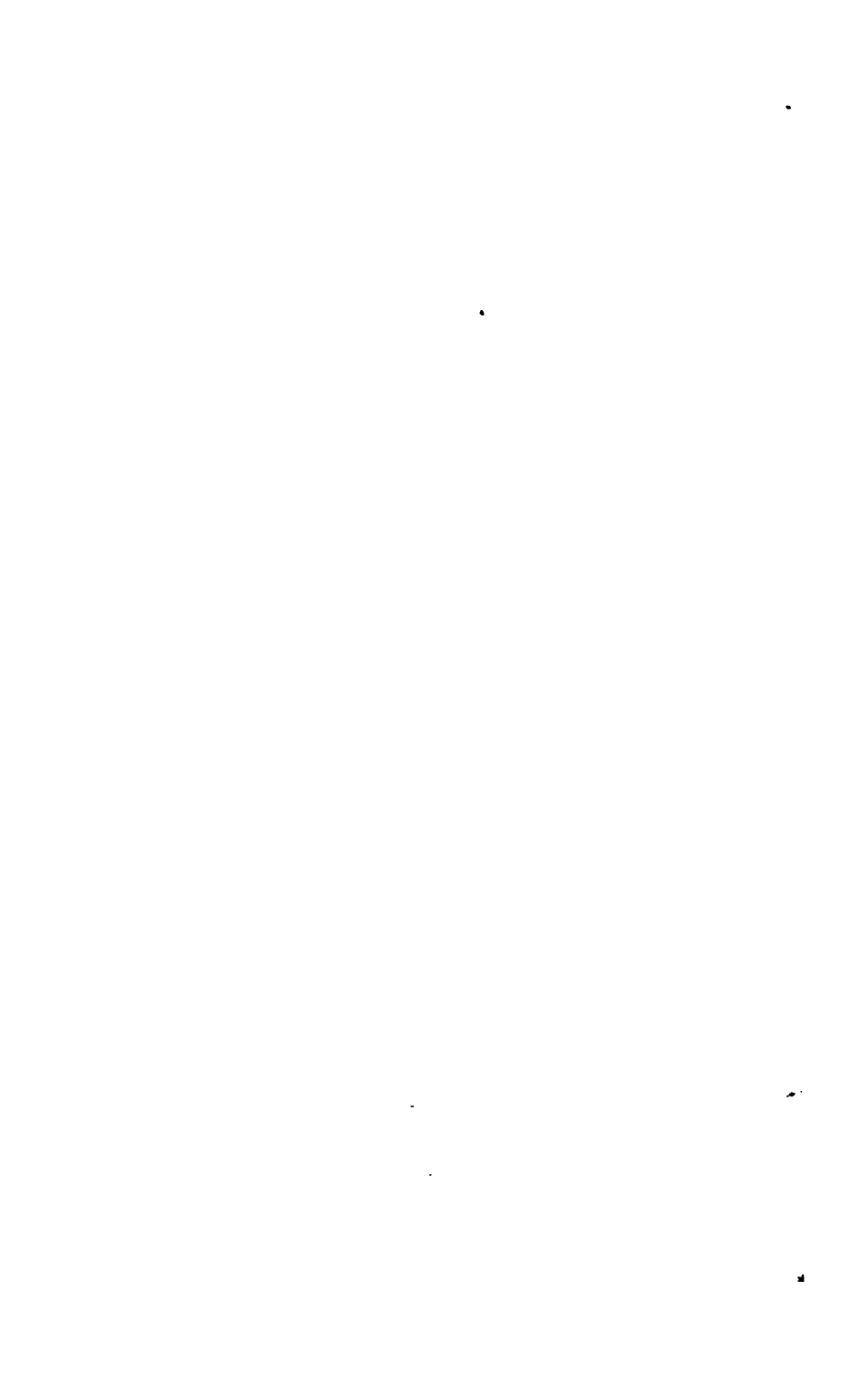
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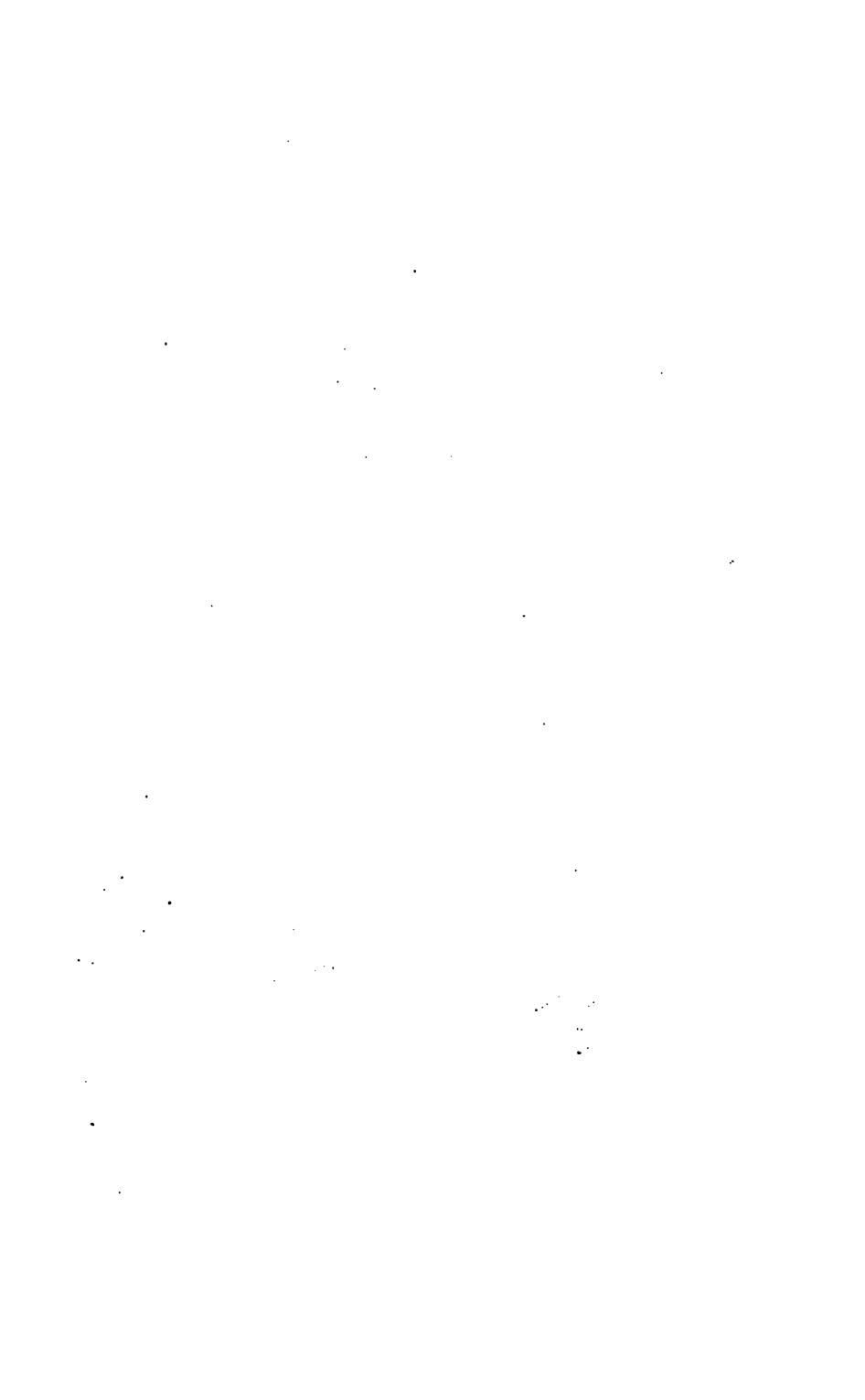


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HEAVILY HANDICAPPED



HEAVILY HANDICAPPED

BY

GENIE HOLTZMEYER

AUTHOR OF "DAUGHTERS OF EVE," "MIZPAH," "HER OWN WAY."

In Two Volumes

VOL. I.



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CHARLES DICKENS AND EVANS,
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I Dedicate my Banling

TO

ITS GODFATHER.



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HEAVILY HANDICAPPED.

PROLOGUE.

It was a snowy January night, and the one theatre of the small manufacturing town of Dartle was crowded to excess.

As a rule, north countrymen are not great playgoers ; but for the last fortnight their latent curiosity had been roused by flaring posters, announcing that the grand burlesque of "Prince Charming" would be played for one week at the Theatre Royal. Side by side with this bill were life-sized portraits of a handsome Prince Charming, holding the hand of a Princess Bella Thanelle, of such extraordinary beauty that the

whole town was in an uproar to see the original.

The photographers exhibited portraits of Miss Miami Vandeleur as the Princess, and Miss Ada Wilmot as the Prince, and attracted gazing crowds to their windows.

The upper classes took seats about a week beforehand; and from the time the first poster appeared till the opening night, it was the one topic of conversation among rich and poor.

The result was that the house was crammed from floor to ceiling; and the manager, peering through a rent in the drop-scene, congratulated himself on the success of his speculation, and went to pay some slight attention to the ladies, who were the cause of all this stir, mentally hoping that they might come up to public expectation and recoup his expenses.

Their appearance was certainly favourable.

Miss Wilmot was a tall, splendidly-made woman, with magnificently-formed limbs, which she had not the smallest compunction in showing to their very greatest advantage.

Her face, though undeniably handsome, had a coarse, bold expression, which, to a minute observer, in a great measure destroyed the charm, which the beauty of outline, fine eyes, and masses of bright brown hair gave her.

Miami Vandeleur was slighter and fairer than her companion, and as far as regular beauty went, her inferior; but from her manner and expression infinitely the more charming. Her face always wore a frank, pleasing smile, which at the first glance was often taken for innocence and ingenuousness. Her golden hair at once stamped her the actress, but the modest way in which she lowered her dark eyes, and the low tone in which she always spoke, led people to believe she was all she seemed to be, and

that it indeed broke her heart to display her figure and sing and dance before a crowd.

Ada Wilmot could have told a different tale, but the Vandeleur was clever, and played her game well.

Though they always denied it, many people—from their great likeness—believed them to be sisters, as indeed they were.

The daughters of a small shopkeeper in a London suburb, they had grown up without any education, and with the curse of beauty; for to girls in their position beauty could be but a curse and a snare. Ada was the first to fall a victim. Her father suggested that she should go out as a lady's maid, and in a rage at such a proposition, she sought and obtained an engagement at a theatre, where nothing would be required of her but to show her magnificent figure.

The rest soon followed. She was what

the manager called "taken up" and removed from the stage for a time, while her voice, which uncultivated was of great beauty, was trained. Soon she became an ornament to the profession as a burlesque actress.

Far from feeling her degradation, Anne Warren (for such was her real name) sent for her sister Maria, who, under the imposing name of Miami Vandeleur, delighted her audiences with her graceful acting and sprightly dancing. Such then had been their life for the past eight years.

As the manager entered, Ada Wilmot was haranguing a lovely little child, who stood shivering and cowering before her.

"Now Cecie," she said, in a harsh coarse voice, "you go and get dressed at once, or you know what will happen."

"But I can't be the Fairy Queen to-night, Aunt Ada," whimpered Cecie, raising her great dark eyes pleadingly.

“Do what you’re told miss,” said Ada so threateningly, that the child, alarmed, hurried away.

She was supposed to be the daughter of an old friend of Miss Wilmot’s, who had died in giving her birth, and Ada had generously undertaken the care of her. That was the story ; if people believed it, so much the better.

Prince Charming, with a laugh at the child’s expense, bounded away on to the stage, to verify her title in every respect.

Presently the little Cecie returned, carried by an attendant. Her fair hair was combed, curled, and decked with a tinsel crown ; her warm woollen skirts changed for thin tulle, and her tiny feet cased in the thinnest of shoes and silken stockings.

Cold and shivering, she crept near the fire ; as near as she dared without fear of damaging the paste and paint, that had been thickly laid on her little face and arms.

A bell rang. Cecie never stirred, but sat on in a half doze, longing to be in bed. Suddenly a harsh voice fell on her ear; it was Miss Wilmot.

"Now Cecie, that was your bell. Why are you not ready at the wings, instead of spoiling your dress over that fire? Get up miss, directly!"

Cecie rose reluctantly.

"Aunt Ada," she said, "I can't go on; my head aches, and I don't know a word of what I have got to say."

"Not go on! Forgotten your part! How dare you miss!" cried the now enraged woman. "Come with me this moment."

Cecie never stirred. Ada Wilmot stamped her foot.

"Will you come?" she said, in a deep ominous voice. "It's just your turn, so come at once."

"No, Aunt Ada, I won't," said the child

with a show of dogged temper, terrible in one so young.

“You won’t!” cried the woman in a voice of fury, and giving her a swinging box on the ears, she flung her away with all her force.

No sooner was the deed done than she began to feel some alarm. She might lose her own engagement if the manager found out it was she who had rendered the child’s appearance impossible, and hastily picking up the senseless little body, she used every means in her power to restore her senses.

The bell rang again. Cecie must go now or never. The call-boy appeared. She was conscious but weak, and hardly able to stand. Ada Wilmot was in despair.

“What can we do?” she cried to Miami, who at that moment entered. “The little brute refused to go on, and when I struck her she fainted, and now she isn’t fit.”

“Oh, give her some brandy!” said Miami carelessly.

Ada seized the notion as a drowning person catches at a straw. A bottle was close at hand, and she poured out half a tumblerful, and held it to the child’s lips.

Cecie, now fully restored to consciousness, drained it to the dregs, and with cheeks flushed, her limbs filled with a borrowed vigour, she was not only fit but anxious to fulfil her part. Tripping lightly on to the stage, she won quite an ovation with her graceful movements, pretty manner of rendering her speech, and fairy-like lovely face.

Two bouquets fell to her and a rapturous encore. Ladies remarked “how happy she looked,” and thought acting seemed quite a pleasure to her, judging from her bright little smiling face, little knowing that the child’s heart was beating wildly with intense fear lest she should fail; for, as she had

stepped on the stage, her aunt had whispered fiercely in her ear :

“ If you don’t play well, I’ll beat you within an inch of your life when you come off.”

With her face still glowing with pleasure after the recall, Cecie came trembling to Ada with the flowers in her arms.

“ Am I good ? ” she asked.

“ Yes ; get away,” said Ada.

The child was turning sorrowfully away, when Miami, who was often kinder to her than Ada, called her, admired the flowers, kissed her, and bade her go away and be quiet ; and the poor, neglected mite crept off to sob out her weariness and misery.

CHAPTER I.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

A WARM, cosy room, the walls hung with a delicate sage-green paper, the furniture and curtains of a rich peacock blue, the carpet, thick velvet pile, everything luxurious and tasty, with lace curtains in the windows, and flowers blooming in elegant little stands. In every available corner, bracket, shelf, or what not, on which were strewed with lavish, but tasteful hand, articles of vertu, rare bits of old china, and the hundred-and-one bric-à-brac, without which no room is habitable. Everything was in harmony, and everything

bespoke the ownership of a person of cultivated taste and habits; one devoted to beauty of form and colour, a person artistic in every sense of the word. Perhaps it is wrong to say everything thus bespoke cultivation and artistic feeling; there was something that jarred, a very serpent in the Eden, one error against good taste that was so flagrant, so gross, that on entering the room, a stranger was rendered half-imbecile with wondering how a person who had such good taste in all else, should be so utterly insensible to the beauties of the limner's art.

It must not be imagined there were no pictures—one was forced to wish the walls were bare. No; pictures there were, but for the most part such villanous daubs that you wondered how the massive frames, which might well have enclosed veritable *chef-d'œuvres*, would condescend to be riveted to such worthless rubbish.

At a pinch the whole collection would have fetched a five-pound note, and as they numbered fifty and upwards, their value may be guessed.

When looked at side by side with the rest of the room, a stranger felt inclined to put the owner down as a person of execrable taste, but when he was informed that this was the private sanctum of Miss Ainsworthy, the popular principal of that still more popular establishment known as Beulah College for Ladies, and that these graceless characterless daubs were votive offerings from past and present pupils, the above-mentioned stranger could not help thinking that besides good taste Miss Ainsworthy owned good-feeling, tact, and kind-heartedness, when she would disfigure her room for fear of distressing her pupils.

Rich and prosperous was Miss Ainsworthy, as indeed her surroundings denoted; she was a handsome woman, still in the prime

of life, but three-and-thirty, with a face which had perhaps no regular beauty beyond its outline, which was perfect. The mouth, though well-formed, was rather large, and the square firm chin a thought too heavy; the face owed its beauty to its ever varying expression, and to the large dark magnificent eyes, whose steadfast gaze made them true windows of the great soul within.

Her pupils often wondered why Miss Ainsworthy had never married, and the more romantic opined that she had sustained some fearful cross in love, which had made her evermore eschew masculine society; but had they seen their darling mistress in society they would have found their dream rudely shattered.

Mabel Ainsworthy loved admiration better than most women, she liked the society of men, and was never better pleased than when the centre of an admiring group, and

had now more lovers by half than fell to the lot of the belles of her acquaintance. But better far than admiration, Mabel Ainsworthy loved liberty. She had pined for it from her girlhood, and it had been her one dream, when the hope of realising its pleasures seemed utterly without foundation.

Her father had been an admiral, very poor, and equivalently proud. Her mother having died when she was but fifteen, she found herself thus early installed as mistress of a very humble establishment in pine-scented Bournemouth.

Her father was nearly blind, very crotchety in temper, and wanted constant care and attention, and for eleven long years Mabel was the slave of his whims and caprices, besides having to bear the grinding weight of poverty. How she longed for liberty during those years of privation, how she hated her scanty cheap dresses, and her lonely isolated life! Admiral Ainsworthy

having come of a good stock himself, and married a lady of equal rank, deemed few people good enough to form society for himself and his daughter, and thus their only friends were amongst the few relatives and acquaintances that visited Bournemouth in the season. Even thus, Mabel had her lovers, but she thought more deeply of marriage and married life than most girls do, and the result of her cogitations was, that she should leave the life of bondage, which, in the natural course of events must end before long, to put her neck under a yoke which would gall her for her whole life. She refused all offers, with difficulty preventing herself from being dazzled when an earl's coronet was laid at her feet, but she guided her little bark past the fatal rock, and was saved.

Two months later her father died; and when six more had flown, the offer was again made, but Mabel had tasted the

sweets of liberty, and with unparalleled audacity, declined.

Since her father's death she had been visiting her maternal uncle, Sir Geoffrey Wilbraham, whilst the cottage and its effects were sold; and when the Earl of Comberfield's offer was renewed, she had as her worldly possessions a piano, a good library of books, a not very ample wardrobe, and one hundred and fifty pounds in hard cash, the proceeds of the sale.

"I don't love you Henry," she had said, "and therefore I could never put up with your temper. I should want my own way, and you'd insist on having yours, and as I should not give in, the end would be a divorce or something of the kind."

"But what shall you do Mabel?" he asked. "My poor girl, you must think of the future."

"And I have thought of the future.

I'll keep a school. Of course it will be small at first, but it will grow large in time, and amongst my girls I shall be absolute mistress."

Mabel was firm. She would *not* marry, and she would keep a school, so all her relations could do was to establish her in a fashionable neighbourhood, as principal of a high-class ladies' college.

She had prospered well during the seven years that had passed, had paid off the money lent to start her, and was rich and flourishing, and the leading member of a *coterie* of literary, artistic, and musical people.

She did not trouble her grand relatives much, laughingly saying she was out of place amongst them, and keeping up friendly intercourse with them at a distance only. Her pupils loved her almost to adoration, and those few who were happy enough to be admitted as boarders,

felt themselves favoured before all the world.

Beyond making a progress through the schoolroom every morning, she did nothing in the school, though by some means entirely her own she contrived to know each pupil personally, and to be their friend more than their mistress, often taking them with her in her daily drives.

The afternoon was cloudy, and thinking it too doubtful to venture out, Miss Ainsworthy had dismissed her neat victoria and pair of bays, and determined to devote a few hours to finishing an article for a periodical, ere she dressed for a dinner, to which she was due at eight.

Hardly had she settled her papers and collected her thoughts, when a tap came at the door.

"Come in!" she cried somewhat impatiently, without turning round.

"I must beg a few minutes' conversation

with you Miss Ainsworthy," said the voice of Mrs. Eltham, the head-mistress.

Miss Ainsworthy turned in a moment. She always showed great deference to Mrs. Eltham, more to show an example to her pupils than for any other reason—personally she disliked her. She was the widow of a country clergyman, and an intensely cold high-principled woman, who went through the world forcing respect from everyone, but neither giving nor receiving sympathy.

"I want to speak to you about Miss De Vere," said the lady in a hard dry voice. "Are you at liberty?"

"Oh certainly; pray come in."

"Perhaps I may request Miss De Vere to enter also," and there advanced into the room a girl of about seventeen. She was very fair, with a profusion of soft golden hair, and large expressive gray eyes. Her cheeks were very flushed, and her

face wore an unmeaning look at which Miss Ainsworthy wondered.

The girl was expensively and well dressed in the height of the fashion, and carried herself with a well-born elegant manner; but, changed though her surroundings were, Time, the great worker of all changes, had in no wise altered her face, which was that of the unfortunate child we last saw on the boards of a theatre.

How had she come to Miss Ainsworthy when that lady was such a stickler for references? How had she acquired the high-sounding name of De Vere? Where were her aunts?

Miss Ainsworthy gazed at the girl in surprise, and then said,

“What, you in trouble, Cecie? I thought you were one of Mrs. Eltham’s best girls.”

Cecie smiled vaguely and then hung her head.

Mrs. Eltham spoke.

"My complaint against Miss De Vere is in no way connected with her studies. I couldn't wish for a better scholar than Cecily has always proved. I have brought her to you to-day to make a grave charge against her, one which I should not have ventured to make without first having fully ascertained my suspicions were well founded."

There was a pause. Miss Ainsworthy felt nervous, fearing to hear that Cecily had been taking something from one of her schoolfellows. Dreadful as this idea was, the reality proved infinitely worse.

"Look at her," pursued Mrs. Eltham. "I can hardly frame my lips to speak the dreadful words. Look at her, madam, and see for yourself what I have to tell you."

Miss Ainsworthy looked. The girl was flushed and seemed dazed and confused; but still she was no nearer the truth.

"Go on!" she said peremptorily.

Mrs. Eltham raised her hand, and pointing to Cecily said,

"This is what I say. Cecily de Vere is intoxicated, and has been so several times of late."

"What!" cried Miss Ainsworthy, starting from her seat. She had been prepared for folly or meanness, but not vice. "What did you say?"

"Cecily de Vere is not herself," persisted Mrs. Eltham.

Miss Ainsworthy seized the girl by the shoulder. "Do you hear what is said, child! what have you to answer?" Cecie opened her eyes (she had been half asleep) and smiled vaguely at Miss Ainsworthy.

"Yes, I hear," she said, speaking thickly; then her head fell forward and she appeared asleep.

"I fear it is but too true," said Miss Ainsworthy sadly.

“I fear so,” Mrs. Eltham responded. “But what can be done? Shall you send for her friends?”

Miss Ainsworthy paused a moment in deep thought.

“No,” she said, “if you will kindly assist me, I will lay her down on this sofa, and let her sleep.”

Mrs. Eltham somewhat scornfully cleared the sofa of some of its cushions, and Miss Ainsworthy lifting the child in her arms, laid her gently down covering her with a warm furry rug.

“Indeed Miss Ainsworthy you are too kind to her,” Mrs. Eltham cried out. “How can you show such gentle care to—well, to a drunkard?”

“Hush Mrs. Eltham, you forget how young she is, you forget the thousand-and-one excuses there are for her. I shall of course punish her with the utmost severity, still I cannot but be lenient to her in my

thoughts. To my mind, the fault lies with Miss Melliush, for not attending more strictly to my rule that nothing is brought into the school without my knowledge. Cecily de Vere was most likely——”

“I wish I could take your view of the case,” Mrs. Eltham said mournfully. “But unfortunately, from sad experience in my late husband’s parish, I perceive in Miss De Vere the symptoms of an habitual drunkard.”

“Impossible! You must be mistaken!”

“I wish I could be, but unfortunately drunkenness is such a prevailing vice, that one cannot be a clergyman’s wife long without learning every phase of the foul disease.”

“You forget Mrs. Eltham, your husband’s parish lay in one of the worst parts of London, amongst people of the lowest and commonest type; and, though I cannot sufficiently admire your courage in pursuing

your good works, even in those dangerous and fever-haunted dens, yet you must allow me to remind you, that you are now speaking of a girl whose rearing has been that of a lady, and above all, that the vice which I cannot but deplore, is not prevalent among females."

"Excuse me madam," said Mrs. Eltham, reddening a little under the reproof, "drinking is now quite as common among women as men, and they will even take eau-de-cologne when wine or spirits are beyond their reach."

"How shocking," rejoined Miss Ainsworthy, without showing much interest in the subject. "But still, I presume the females you mention, are not of the society to which Miss De Vere belongs. Her family and early education would both render such a supposition impossible."

"As to her early education, I consider it to have been infamous. I have heard that

girl use language better suited to a cabman, and I must confess to have frequently felt curious as to her family."

Miss Ainsworthy rose—her face flushed, her manner excited.

"Your words are an insult to me and my arrangements, Mrs. Eltham. Perhaps you may not be aware that I receive no pupil into the college without the most unexceptionable references. You are aware that I have under my roof the daughters of some of England's proudest peers. For what do you take me, if you think I could so far forget my responsibility as to allow them to mingle with anybody's daughters?"

"I take you to have been deceived," the head-mistress answered coldly, her hands lying idly on her crape dress, her passionless gray eyes gazing fully at her employer.

With an angry gesture, Miss Ainsworthy crossed the room, and unlocking a bureau, took from it a large leather-bound volume.

After turning the leaves for some moments in silence, she exclaimed,

“Here is the entry, ‘Easter term, 1872. Cecily de Vere, sixteen, entered January 20th, daughter of the late Colonel Edward de Vere, who died in India. Reference, Sir Hugh Stapylton, a maternal uncle.’ You will observe I am particular in my inquiries, sufficiently so to satisfy even you, Mrs. Eltham,” she said sarcastically.

“Did you ever see her mother?” said the governess, without noticing the former speech.

“No; she was brought by her uncle. Her mother is long since dead. She lives with some maiden aunts in Cornwall.”

“Humph!” said Mrs. Eltham, “then I suppose it is all right, but what I have to say about her is, that you ought not to retain Miss De Vere any longer in your house. As I have said, she uses most profane language, and on more than one

occasion I have suspected her of imbibing. To-day, being convinced of it, I brought her to you. I need now no longer trespass on your time madam," and with a slight inclination of the head, she left the room.

Miss Ainsworthy looked angrily after the retreating figure, and murmured,

"I would not keep that insolent woman an hour, but that I know her to be so thoroughly trustworthy;" and considerably disturbed, she took up a piece of fancy work, and settled herself to wait for Cecie's awaking.

In about two hours she stirred, moaned, and finally sat up, rubbing her eyes in wonder at finding where she was.

"Miss Ainsworthy," she said.

"Come here, dear."

Cecie came and sat down on a low stool beside her. She had evidently no recollection of what had happened.

"What was the matter with you when

you were brought in here?" was the first inquiry.

Cecie's face changed. She remembered all now; and with a cry of shame she buried her face in Miss Ainsworthy's lap.

"They tell me Cecie, that you were—that you had been taking some wine that disagreed with you. Now you know it is quite against my rules to allow any of you wine unless it is ordered by a doctor. How then did you come by it? Tell me the truth Cecie, mind."

The child's face was a study—fear, anxiety, cunning, all were working there. At last she spoke.

"Oh Miss Ainsworthy, dear Miss Ainsworthy, forgive me. I know I am wicked, but forgive me and don't send me away; oh, promise me that!"

"My dear, I can promise nothing till I know all. Where had you got the wine?"

"It was not wine, it was eau-de-cologne," sobbed Cecie.

"Eau-de-cologne ! How came you to take that ?"

"Mrs. Eltham scolded me and locked me in my room for—for swearing ; and she—she said she should tell you to send me away—and I was frightened and took some eau-de-cologne, because it always makes me feel happy again directly."

"Then you are in the habit of taking it ?"

"Oh yes ! Aunt A——, Aunt Maud, and Aunt Evelyn always do," she said artlessly.

"My poor child," said Miss Ainsworthy, in a tone of deep pity, "but did they teach you, and so young ?"

"I used to take brandy when I was six," she said.

"But what for ?" said the astonished mistress.

"Oh, I always had it when I was

act——when I was ill,” she said hurriedly, correcting herself.

It would appear Cecie had been set a lesson of forgetfulness which she had but indifferently mastered.

There was silence for some time, then the mistress spoke.

“Cecily,” she said, in a sad and yet stern voice, “you must see for yourself it is quite impossible to retain you any longer as my pupil. I hear that you use bad language, and besides, by your own showing, you are in the habit of drinking. I could not keep you among my innocent girls. That is quite out of the question. I shall send to-night for your aunt, and till she arrives, I must keep you ; but not an hour after.”

“Oh don’t, don’t send for aunt,” sobbed Cecie, “she will beat me if you do. Oh keep me here ! I will be good if you don’t send me away.”

“Cecie I dare not keep you. Your uncle

trusted you to me. Were I to keep you in my house, with fever about, would he not think me to blame? Of course. Then how can I keep you for the sake of the other girls when you have a disease far more contagious than fever? Listen to me, Cecie. You must pray, and strive night and day, to conquer this evil habit. It is not only that you will be a disgrace to your people if you allow it to grow on you, but it is for the evils it carries in its train. Every sin, every wickedness will arise from it. Oh Cecie, as you hope one day to join your papa above, think of what I say. Pray to God, for He can and will help you, if you are earnest in your prayer."

"I will, I will, if you will only let me stay," moaned Cecie, clinging tightly to her mistress.

"I cannot keep you, little one. I must do my duty by the others." And despite her entreaties, Miss Ainsworthy was firm in

her resolve, only deciding to send for the uncle, Sir Hugh Stapylton, who had placed Cecily with her, instead of the aunts the child so much dreaded.

CHAPTER II.

AT SIBTHORP MANOR.

THE gray hues of night were giving place to the rosy brightness of an April dawn, as two travellers stepped from the station at Bodmin into one of the few flies that were waiting for the express from London.

"Best hotel" was the order, and five minutes later they were standing before a comfortable fire in the handsome coffee-room of the hotel *par excellence* of the town.

They were Cecily, and a tall, fair, and unmistakably well-bred man. His features

were aristocratic, his eyes large and gray, like Cecie's; it was easy to perceive from the marvellous resemblance between them, that they were related.

The waiter, too sleepy to remember his manners, noted the likeness, and said,

"Private room, sir? This way, sir; shall I tell the chambermaid to come and attend to your daughter, sir?"

The gentleman started, flushed crimson, and with more precision than was necessary, corrected the man.

"This young lady is my niece; be good enough to tell the chambermaid to prepare a bath for her. I shall require breakfast in an hour's time, and a carriage to continue my journey at twelve. Can you procure it?"

"Certainly sir, certainly!" said the man with a deferential bow, muttering to himself, "He's a swell, I'll bet;" then hailing the porter; "Any name on the luggage, Bob?"

"Miss De Vere, Sibthorp Manor, Trepolpen. Why that's forty mile away!"

"Any name on the gent's?"

"Sir Hugh Stapylton."

"There, I knowed he belonged to the quality," the waiter said triumphantly. "Needn't a been so sharp about the little 'un bein' his daughter, though. If they ain't as like as two peas my name arn't Martin Brown; and as I have believed it to be so these forty year, why I hope it is. I don't want to make no change at my time o' life."

In the sitting-room sat Cecie; her large mournful eyes fixed on her uncle's face.

"Uncle," she said pleadingly, "won't you speak to me? Can you not forgive me?"

Sir Hugh's answer was to take her on his knee and kiss her brow with deep affection.

"Forgive you my child? It's not you

who need forgiveness, but those who have taught you the dreadful habit for which Miss Ainsworthy has been obliged to send you away."

Cecie began to cry.

"You mean Aunt A—— I mean Aunt Maud ; she taught me when I was——"

"Hush Cecily," Sir Hugh said gravely, "you must not speak against your mother."

"My mother ! what are you thinking of, Uncle Hugh ? Thank goodness she is only my aunt. Tell me Uncle, do you know why I may not call her Aunt Ada now ? I always used to ; and it seems so strange saying Aunt Maud instead. I always have to think a moment before I can recollect myself, and I am obliged to be very careful, for she boxes my ears or sends me to my room if by chance I do forget. Aunt Maud is very unkind to me do you know Uncle, and I so often wish I had a mother like other girls. What was my mother like ?

Do tell me; no one ever speaks to me of her, and I should like to hear everything about her. Do tell me."

Sir Hugh groaned; the girl's eager questioning seemed torture to him. "Shall I tell her the truth?" he murmured; "no, no—a thousand times no. Better though perhaps, to tell her something of the truth. Yes, she is old enough now to be made to understand that."

Then aloud he said,

"My dear, I am going to take you into my confidence. I am going to trust you Cecily, and you must prove yourself worthy of that trust by keeping faith with me, and not mentioning a word of what I am going to tell you to anyone else. You are aware that not three years ago your aunts were on the stage; through a legacy they have been enabled to leave that profession and settle quietly down. In England there is so much prejudice felt

and shown against actresses, that your aunts have rightly deemed it advisable when trying to gain some position in the society of Trepolpen, to change their names to Maud and Evelyn FitzAlleyn. In the quiet spot they have selected, the chance of their ever being recognised is very remote ; and it is clearly your duty Cecily, to try and forget they have ever been on the stage, and to adopt their new names as quickly as you can. Your aunts are anxious to lead quiet lives, and any hint at their former occupation would prevent their being received, so you must try to aid instead of distress them."

"Yes Uncle, I will ; but about my mother ? I have so often wanted to get you all to myself like this, and ask you so much about her. They will never tell me anything."

Sir Hugh winced.

"Another time dear I will talk to you about her; what I want particularly to say now is this. You must make up your mind never again to be such a terrible disgrace to us. A young girl like you ought not to care for any other drink than water."

"That is what Miss Ainsworthy said, and she said if I did again the wicked thing for which she sent me away, I should never meet my papa in heaven. Did you know him Uncle Hugh?"

The blood rushed hotly to Sir Hugh's brow, and fled as suddenly, leaving his face deadly pale, as he muttered with a half groan,

"Oh, truly the sins of my youth are finding me out!"

"Uncle Hugh, what is the matter? Why do you say such strange things?" demanded Cecie.

"Nothing! child, nothing! I am only

very tired. See, here is the chambermaid. Go to your room my dear."

When she was gone Sir Hugh flung himself in his chair, and with his face buried in his hands, sat deep in thought for some time.

Try how she would, when she came back, Cecily could not make him say one syllable on the subject of her dead parents; only several times during the journey she heard him murmur, "I'll speak to Maud, I'll speak to Maud!"

Cecily's curiosity had, however, been by no means satisfied with her uncle's answer. She was much older in heart and mind than her years betokened, her early life could perhaps account for this—in any case, there was a very old head on Cecily's young shoulders.

She had very soon perceived that her uncle's answers were mere evasions, and had noticed too his evident embarrassment

at her questions concerning her dead parents. She had of late thought much upon this subject, and there were some difficulties which she greatly wanted smoothed away. The assured positions of the girls who had been her associates, had made her feel very much ashamed of her two actress aunts, and she did not need her uncle's request to make their early life a dead secret. A week in the company of girls of high rank, had shown her that had they known she was in any way connected with the stage, she would have been tabooed and perhaps expelled; so after long cogitations she decided, greatly to her own satisfaction—that Mesdames Wilmot and Vandeleur were in nowise related to her, only people with whom her uncle had placed her. Only she often wondered why he could not have found guardians for her in a higher sphere than her so-called aunts; people who would bring her

out when her time came—for Cecily had visions of London seasons, Court balls, the grand tier at the opera, mornings in the Row, and the thousand and one evanescent delights which fill the breasts of the stately exotics as they burst into bloom.

The travellers reached Sibthorp Manor just as the weary sun was reaching his destination, and, ere he went—gilding all around with that brilliant but fleeting glow with which he bids the earth adieu.

It was a fair and lovely scene on which his last glances were resting.

Trepolpen was a small and unimportant fishing village, nestling down between the cleft of the two high cliffs. It was picturesque in the extreme; the red roofs of the houses contrasted richly against the brown rocky cliffs towering above them: and to relieve the sombre tones, the yellow glittering sands, and the broad blue expanse of ocean.

One rocky ridge jutted far out into the sea, forming a sort of miniature Giant's Causeway, gradually rounding, till it protected some small portion of the bare coast from the violence of the Atlantic, and afforded a safe harbourage and anchorage for the village fleet.

This ridge had, little by little been smoothed, till it afforded safe footway for the youngest or feeblest, and was now called, by courtesy, the Pier, though more familiarly known as Penruth's Ridge ; Penruth being the name of the owners of Sibthorp Manor, who had been instrumental in preserving and smoothing the ridge, for their own private, most likely smuggling purposes.

Various comfortable country houses lay around Trepolpen ; the Penruths had been spendthrifts, and had been obliged to sell from time to time, portions of the land that had once been all their own for miles around.

Thus it came about that there was quite a settlement around Sibthorp Manor, which was the place *par excellence* of the district. These settlers were for the most part out-at-elbows gentlemen—men who had run through their fortune, and been obliged to look out for a quiet place, where they could take their wives and families to live in comfort, and make five hundred do the work of ten.

Needy as everyone was, they contrived to keep up a continual round of small gaieties, and to their equals, were without doubt, the pleasantest and most sociable set of people going. They, one and all, were people of family, and when a new arrival appeared on their quiet scene, they had to be well assured of his connections, rank, and status, before they opened their doors.

They had taken kindly to the FitzAlleyns. Those artful ladies had learnt the ways of

the place before settling, and had a genealogical tree hanging in their hall, which traced them directly back to the Baron FitzAlleyn of Robin Hood memory. They had the FitzAlleyn arms on every available screen, oaken chair, and carriage panel; the crest on all the silver and livery buttons, and on a large signet-ring which Miss FitzAlleyn always wore, and which had been her dear papa's.

She had also a curious antique-looking brooch, with the crest interwoven amongst roses and thistles, which her seventh removed great grandfather had worn in some famous battle to fasten in his plume. The story of the battle was authentic, and had been acquired and remembered with a diligence worthy of a better cause.

The simple folk of Trepolpen could not afford to visit London, and rarely had visitors from the great world, so the two

ladies were on easy terms with many of the grand folks of the day. To enable Cecie—who was a stumbling-block in their victorious career—to talk as glibly, and a degree more truthfully in the same strain, they had sent her to Miss Ainsworthy's. Then they had Sir Hugh Stapylton always to the fore—a man of well-known family. So Trepolpen accepted them at their own valuation and opened its doors wide for them to enter.

Maud and Evelyn FitzAlleyn were seated at dinner, when a loud peal from the door-bell sounded through the house.

“Who can it be, Lyn?” said Miss FitzAlleyn. She always called her sister Lyn; she thought it sounded old-familyish.

“I don't know,” Lyn answered. “I hope it is no one of consequence, for the D'Eyncourts and Fells come to-night.”

“But who can it be?” again urged Maud.

"One of the old set found us out," suggested Lyn sweetly.

"Don't say that, Lyn," said Maud turning pale. "That would be too hard now."

"I've no suggestion to make, unless it's something wrong with the Incubus."

Maud gave a sigh of relief. "I hope she's not very ill," she said.

"But you'd be very glad if she were," Lyn laughed.

Maud had no time for a rejoinder, for the butler entered with the information that Sir Hugh Stapylton and Miss De Vere had just arrived, and were in the morning-room.

"I told you so dearest," said Lyn; delicately laying her *serviette* on the table and rising.

"Confound the girl, what brings her back!" cried Maud, for the moment forgetting the restraining presence of the servants.

Lyn pursed up her mouth into a fascinating smile, saying in her polite soft voice,

“Oh Maud darling! you naughty girl, fie! fie!” and putting her hands to her ears she ran gracefully from the room.

Evelyn FitzAlleyn was an actress to the core. She never did anything without knowing exactly what the effect would be, she was never surprised into being natural, her true character and temper were kept hidden from every eye, even to her own sister she would not reveal herself. There was no blow she could not meet with a graceful shrug and smile. Life was to her a never-ending comedy-drama.

Maud was very different. She could not always control her feelings; and, being a woman of violent temper, there were times when she forgot the vigilant watch she was forced to keep over her unruly member, and would rap out some startling expression

which she would have given worlds to recall the next moment.

Flushed and vexed at the amazed look on the butler's face, Maud, too, rose from the table and swept haughtily from the room.

CHAPTER III.

CECIE'S RETURN.

ENTERING the morning-room, there was an angry frown on Miss FitzAlleyn's face that augured ill for Cecily.

"This is quite an unexpected pleasure Hugh," she said in an ominously soft voice.

"What's brought you here Cis?"

Cecie shrank back, afraid to answer, but Sir Hugh interposed,

"Some unpleasantness at school; we will tell you all about it after."

"I'll be told at once," Maud said, angry lines gathering round her mouth. "What is it?"

"I hoped it was the holidays," simpered Lyn.

"Hold your tongue, Lyn, and don't be a fool," Maud said sharply.

Lyn commenced instantly with a soft, though meaning smile,

"Dearest Maud, pray don't be so boisterous," but her sister turned from her impatiently with,

"Now Sir Hugh, out with it."

"Let Cecie go to take her hat off, then," he urged.

"No. She shall stay. Go on."

Sir Hugh took a turn across the room; it was perhaps the most uncomfortable moment of his life. He looked from the angry imperious woman to the pale trembling girl, and began, in a hesitating way,

"She has been sent away from Miss Ainsworthy's under most unpleasant circumstances."

Maud leant forward and asked a question

eagerly, with the manner of one who dreads the answer.

“She can go back when it is settled.”

“I fear not. In fact, I am grieved to say Miss Ainsworthy has refused to receive her again.”

“In short, she has been expelled,” Maud said, with that eagerness some people have to sum-up the case and face the worst.

Cecie buried her face in her hands as the grave answer was returned,

“Expelled.”

There was silence for the space of a minute. Maud stood aghast, petrified with horror; then, with one swift movement, she seized Cecie by the shoulder.

“What for—tell me what for?”

“I dare not,” Cecie sobbed, terrified by the fierce expression of Miss FitzAlleyn’s face.

“Have pity!” cried Lyn.

“Pity! I keep my pity for those who

deserve it. I do not sow it broadcast amongst those who are only reaping the reward of their own actions. What are you expelled for?"

Sir Hugh quietly put Maud aside ; and, taking Cecie by the hand, said coldly and quietly,

"For intemperance."

There was another profound silence ; the shell had burst.

Both ladies had started back in horrified surprise at the unlooked-for reply. Cecie's fair head was buried on her uncle's shoulder, her whole frame shaken with violent but penitent sobs. In the girl's heart a prayer was rising for help to conquer this dreadful evil.

Miss FitzAlleyn was the first to speak. In a hard melodramatic tone she began,

"Is this the way you repay me for all my self-sacrifice and devotion to you ? You cruel, wicked girl, thus to bring disgrace

and misery upon us all. Have we not already had trouble enough, that you must overwhelm us with this! Through our bitter misfortune my poor sister and I were forced to strive to make a competence for our declining years on the stage, when an unexpected legacy enabled us to leave that dreadful life and settle down in ease; we determined to give you all the advantages that were denied us, and by giving you associates of your own rank, hoped to make you a comfort and a credit to us, and to see you well married. What comes of all our trouble? You disgrace yourself, throw away the chance of making a good position, and then return, to undermine all the friendships we have formed, and turn the world against poor Lyn and me by your horrid habits. You are a curse to us, Cecily. You have been a thorn in my side ever since you were born, you——”

“Pardon me a moment,” cried Cecily, her face flushing, her whole aspect changing from the drooping, sorrowing girl she had been at the commencement of the sentence, to a fierce, indignant woman. “Beyond the fact that you have at times been kind to me, I fail to see what right you have to speak to me as you have just done. My uncle simply placed me in your charge; and, I presume, made it well worth your while to undertake the care of me. As to the benefit you have done me in sending me to a school amongst girls to whom I dared not speak truthfully about my home, I cannot see it, unless, indeed, Uncle means to take me away from here and place me in my true position. After having mixed with my equals, I shall only feel the degradation and untruth of my position more keenly if I am forced to remain here, and claim as my blood relatives two *ci-devant*——”

"Hold!" cried her uncle, as without a sound Miss FitzAlleyn fell fainting to the ground.

Cecie looked round aghast. Lyn and Sir Hugh's face were as white as that of the fainting woman.

"What have I said?" she asked.

"Far too much," Lyn said in a hard, unnatural tone; "you had better go to your room," and taking Cecily by the arm, she drew her into the dining-room, and ringing the bell, ordered the maid to come and see to Miss De Vere.

Cecily, thus thrust out, was more perplexed than ever to find a reason for her aunt's sudden faintness; it was evidently caused by some chance word of her own. But what word? She recalled her whole speech as nearly as she could, but could find nothing in it to cause such emotion. There was some deeper meaning in it all than she could fathom, and she determined

to find out the whole secret, whatever it might be.

The girl was not disturbed about her aunt's seizure. She had never cared much about her in her early days, and as she grew up and her mind had been educated, she grew to dislike and despise her for the coarseness which she could not conceal. Instead of worrying herself therefore, she bade the maid show her over the house, as this was her first visit to Sibthorp; and by the time she had reached the room which was to be her own, she had arrived at the conclusion that, were it not for the presence of her aunts, there was no place she knew she would rather call home.

Cecily sat by the open window inhaling the sweet scents of the flowers, wafted to her on the evening breeze, while the maid unpacked her dresses.

"Which dress shall I put out for you to-night miss?" she asked.

“ Oh I shall not bother to dress to-night ; it's past seven already.”

“ But there's company coming to-night, miss, to practise for the concert that is to be next month. The singing is something lovely when they all get together, trying over part-music. One of the gentlemen—Mr. Darrell D'Eyncourt—sings so beautiful that they do say Mr. Reeves, the London gentleman, wouldn't come to Exeter through jealousy. Squire Martin said the other day to old Job, the parish clerk, after service, ‘ Job,’ he says, ‘ that voice of Mr. D'Eyncourt's will go on getting stronger till it lifts the roof off our little church.’ Old Job, who is a gardener on week-days, and a thrifty soul, said, ‘ Well, Squire, I'm main glad to hear it, for maybe next summer it will reach as far as Mrs. D'Eyncourt's pea-field, and frighten away them horrid birds as eat all the peas up this year.’ ”

Cecie leant out of the window, and her eye caught two figures on the terrace, dimly visible in the gloaming. Sir Hugh and Miss FitzAlleyn were just parting as she caught sight of them; Sir Hugh's voice reached her.

"Well Maud, I will go and dress if these people are really coming; but I hoped for a long talk with you about Cecie, she ought to be told——"

"Hush," said Maud in agitated tones, "some one may hear. Come to my boudoir to-night when they are all gone, and we three can talk it over. After what she said just now, she must never know the truth," and she began to weep.

"She spoke in ignorance," Sir Hugh said soothingly.

"But she must never know," Maud persisted; "now go, and I will send Lyn to tell her to dress also."

Cecily drew in her head, and sat a few moments thinking deeply, then she said something very trivial to be the result of such deep cogitation.

"This is a very pretty carpet, Pike."

"Do you think so miss? Mistress did say she thought this would be to your liking, but Miss Evelyn thought you would have preferred rosebuds and moss."

"I like this very much, and it's exactly the same as the one in Aunt Maud's boudoir, is it not?"

"Oh no miss! That's Miss Evelyn's room. Miss FitzAlleyn's has a carpet of brown leaves, not near so pretty."

"I thought you said the small room on the stairs was Aunt Maud's boudoir?" Cecie asked carelessly, but with an anxious look on her face.

"No miss," the maid answered, resting on the edge of the portmanteau she was unpacking. "Miss FitzAlleyn's boudoir is

at the end of the long passage, at the top of the grand staircase. There are a lot of flowers and statues in the passage, but I think you must remember the room as you remarked what a fine view there was."

"Yes, I remember; there is a large statue by the door, is there not? A Venus, I think."

"Well miss, I don't rightly know the name, but Mr. Binn says it's one of the celebrated beauties of the day. He was telling Mrs. Cook so, when she wondered at it's being put there. I believe he did say the name was Venus."

Cecie muttered absently to herself, "Close to the door, that will do nicely," and she relapsed into thought till roused to dress.

Very fair and pretty she looked in the dark and perfectly-fitting blue silk she wore, and Lyn's mental comment was,

"We must get you married. You'll spoil my game altogether." Aloud she merely said, "Why, Cecie, my pet, how pretty you have grown! We shall have all the young men in the neighbourhood coming here in flocks."

Cecie laughed and blushed, and putting her arm round her aunt's waist, whispered,

"Have you forgiven me?"

"Yes dear child," Lyn responded in the same soft voice, and kissing her, took her down the stairs.

"That's Aunt Maud's boudoir, is it not?" Cecie asked, as they passed the passage indicated by Pike.

"Yes. Have you not seen it? Come with me now, then; it's such a charming room."

Lyn passed into the room, but Cecie was apparently too pleased with the flowers and statues in the passage to care to hurry on.

"How lovely!" she exclaimed, pausing at the one Pike had spoken of. "How beautifully arranged!"

"Yes," Lyn said, with some pride; "that was entirely my idea."

The door of the boudoir was close to a deep embrasure, and in it had been placed a beautiful sculpture of Venus; but to take away the hard appearance Lyn considered statuary to have by itself, an enormous azalea stood sentinel on either side.

Cecie became at once enraptured with them.

"I do believe you have got the worst side to the front, Aunt Lyn. I'll get round and see;" and suiting the action to the word, Cecie slid by the side of the flowers, and was half-hidden by the great masses of bloom.

She stooped down, looking at the flowers, and called out laughingly to her aunt,

"What bonny plants they are, auntie! I don't believe you could see me now if you tried ever so hard."

"No, that I can't," Lyn said, peering amongst the blossom; and, after a moment or two waiting to see if her aunt could find her out, Cecie emerged smiling and full of merriment, but with an odd look in her eyes that puzzled Lyn considerably when she thought of it afterwards.

With a few comments on the boudoir, and the view to be got from its windows, they passed on to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PRACTICE.

AN exclamation of pleasure and surprise broke from Cecie as they entered the drawing-room, she had not been prepared for anything half so tasteful and charming coming from the ideas that stood Miss FitzAlley in the stead of artistic feeling.

A delicate blending of indefinable shades, an arrangement of china statuettes and flowers, each appearing to have grown in the spot where they were placed, The Sibthorp's drawing-room was a place to be pleasantly remembered, long after it had faded from the actual sight.

Again Cecie felt she could be happy with such lovely surroundings, and a dream of contentment was stealing over her, which was rudely awakened by a harsh laugh from the far end of the room. It was the serpent in the Eden. The enchanted palace was changed into a dreary wilderness. A shudder ran through her.

“Oh, to be obliged to live with that woman !”

For weeks past she had only heard the refined tones of well-bred women, and the coarse voice of Miss FitzAlleyn, jarred on her more than ever. Bitterly did she regret the fault which had sent her back to that woman ; and in that brief moment she resolved to give her uncle no peace, until he removed her from them for ever.

“Let me introduce my niece, Miss De Vere, to you Mrs. D'Eyncourt,” said

Lyn. "She has come to us rather unexpectedly. Her too-indulgent uncle thought her looking rather pale when he went to see her at school, and made her start off at once to get some Cornish roses; now that we see how she has budded into the young lady these last few months, I don't think we shall be able to spare her to the College again. Shall we darling?" and with a tiny peck at Cecily's cheek, Lyn passed on, repeating the same story to each group; till the reason of Cecie's sudden advent was quite understood by all, Sir Hugh and Miss FitzAlleyn among the number.

Cecie felt drawn to Mrs. D'Eyncourt instantly; the soft pleasant face, shaded by silvery hair and filmy lace, was an object the eye seemed instinctively to court, and she longed to have a better opportunity of knowing her than the present seemed likely to afford her, for

Sir Hugh and Mrs. D'Eyncourt seemed fast friends, and were enjoying a *tête-à-tête*. Apparently their conversation was about Mrs. D'Eyncourt's sons, for their eyes kept wandering to the two fine-looking manly young fellows who were standing in the group round the piano.

Cecie stole away to the window, and, seated on a low seat, looked out into the quiet night; and, listening to the music, thoroughly enjoyed the calm repose which lies on everything in the sweet twilight hours.

Suddenly Darrell D'Eyncourt began to sing. He had a rich, but soft and sympathetic voice; a voice that thrilled the heart, and touched all its tenderest and holiest chords.

To the poor child listening by the window, it seemed to bring forcibly before her the wrong she had done, and spoke to her of a higher, better life than any she had

known. A sickening sense of her own unworthiness overcame her as she listened, and bowing her head on her hands she wept.

A soft touch came on her shoulder, a gentle voice asked her what troubled her.

It was Mrs. D'Eyncourt, who seating herself at her side, talked to her and soothed her, until she was herself again. After a time the two sons joined them.

"Darrell," Mrs. D'Eyncourt said, "I want you to join me in asking Miss De Vere to come and see us. We are your nearest neighbours, and I hope to see a great deal of you. It will be really kind of you, if you will come and see an old woman like me, whenever you can spare time."

Cecie did not know how to take this kind speech ; she cast down her eyes to hide the tears, and a hot flush overspread her face as she thought of her secret, and wondered if Mrs. D'Eyncourt would receive her if she

knew the whole truth. She murmured her thanks.

“Will you let me come and fetch you to-morrow, Miss De Vere?” Darrell asked. “I should like to show you our garden. It is nothing to be compared to yours in size, but it is a very pretty one.”

“Yes, do come!” Edward D'Eyncourt chimed in. “If you care for dogs, I have some beauties. It is a promise, is it not?”

With humid eyes, Cecie acquiesced, and ere long the party broke up.

CHAPTER V.

A LIFE BROKEN.

DARKNESS reigned throughout the Manor House. Everyone had gone to rest, and the whole house was dark and silent. In two rooms only was there any sign of waking life, Cecie's bedroom, and Miss FitzAlleyn's boudoir.

Cecie knelt beside her bed in earnest prayer, and when she had eased her heart of its burden, rose, and wrapped a dressing-gown around her.

"I know I am doing wrong," she thought, "but still I must know the truth; and when I do know it, I will strive to be so

good. If my parents live, I will be a pride to them, and if they do not, I will not bring disgrace on their memory. I must feel assured that these women are nothing to me. What if I find they really are related to me! What should I do? No, it cannot be! I will never believe the same blood runs in our veins; but solve this mystery I must."

Gently unclosing the door, she stole into the passage, and having locked the door on the outside, and removed the key, she went swiftly and silently down the stairs, till, without any hindrance, she found herself safely at the statue, and slipping in behind it, leant forward, and listened intently.

At first no voices reached her ear, and she began to fear she was too late, when a sudden sound at the end of the corridor caused her to shrink back into her hiding-place, and a moment after, Lyn and Sir Hugh passed into the boudoir.

Maud was waiting for them, and gave a rather sharp greeting.

“I expected you half-an-hour ago.”

“I am sure I must apologise,” Sir Hugh answered, “but Lyn came into the garden with me for my last smoke, and the night was so lovely we went farther than we intended.”

“Now that you are here, what about the child?” Miss FitzAlleyn asked.

“This,” said Sir Hugh firmly, “that unless she is kept from falling into such a habit as this one she seems likely to contract, the allowance for her maintenance will stop at once. You ought to have prevented her thinking of such a thing years ago. From what I gather you inculcated it. Would it not have been better to point out the disgrace people were who did follow the path she seems likely to tread, and—well Maud, you know I am not a religious man—but could you not now

show her how displeasing such a habit must be in the sight of Heaven? Show this to her Maud, for pity's sake! Think of her youth and innocence, and save her from herself."

"That will do," Maud said, coldly. "I am obliged to you for your lecture, but I fancy I am quite capable of curing this evil habit in my own way."

Sir Hugh was angered at the scornful tone, and said hotly,

"I would advise you to do your best, for you quite understand the allowance will stop the very first time I hear of any fresh outbreak."

"I daresay my plan will be as efficacious as any lecturing. If I catch her touching wine, I shall simply flog her."

"I don't advise that treatment," Sir Hugh replied. "You may beat the devil into her, instead of out. Reason with her, show her her fault, and I believe she will conquer it,

for love of you, and from the strong sense of right, that underlies all her other feelings."

"I shall do exactly as I think proper," Maud answered.

"And I forbid such treatment."

"How dare you interfere?" Maud began, furiously, but Lyn interposed.

"This was not what we came to talk about, so why dispute over it? Would it not be better to consider what is to be said to her, to prevent any more misunderstandings, and unpleasant scenes like that of this evening? What do you advise, Sir Hugh?"

"What I have always advised, that Maud should tell her the truth."

"The whole truth?" Maud asked.

"Yes, the whole truth; that you are her mother," Sir Hugh answered firmly.

"Never!" cried Maud, "I——"

The rest of her speech was lost in a moan

of intense anguish from outside the door, instantly followed by a heavy fall.

All three, white and scared, rushed to the door; the large azalea was overturned, but no trace of any cause could they find.

Sir Hugh fancied he saw an object at the far end of the corridor, and hurried towards it, to find Lyn's large collie, with tail down, looking the picture of alarm.

"Cecie listening!" Lyn opined, and flew up the stairs to her door, to find it locked, and neither light nor sound within; so, convinced of her mistake, she returned to the others, and after much talk they laid the noise at the collie's door, and retired to rest.

As soon as the sound of Lyn's footsteps had died away, a figure rose from a corner, where it had been crouching, and passing swiftly and noiselessly along towards Cecie's door, unlocked it and entered. It was the girl herself.

Flinging herself on the bed in an agony of despair, she murmured : "How am I to bear it, how to live under this burden of shame and misery? God help me! for alone I cannot bear it. They talk to me of bringing shame on my connections. Who are they to have shame brought on them, and what am I? The nameless child of a horrible woman like that. Why was I born to bear this misery. I hate her! and yet she is my—— No! I would die rather than call her that name. What is to become of me? I have nothing to live for; no one to help me to be a good woman; and I loved the memory of my mother so. I thought of her as an angel—and I find her—no, I will not add another sin—I ought to honour her, and though I cannot with my heart, I will at least keep from reviling her."

Then there was a long silence, broken only by the girl's deep sobs. At last, rising from her bed she went to the window, and

throwing it up, gazed long into the silent starlit night, and as she sat thus, her face changed from that of a bright young girl, into the stern set lines of a woman's who felt herself injured and deceived. She dropped on her knees, and clasping her hands, raised her face to heaven and murmured,

“Here, before my God, I vow that the name of mother shall never pass my lips, and that from this moment my one thought shall be how to free myself from this woman. Henceforth I must live for myself alone, and may my sins be laid at the door of the woman who has caused them.”

Cecie was spared the pain of meeting Miss FitzAlleyn the next morning at the breakfast-table.

As day broke, she fell into a heavy slumber, from which she was roused by Pike bringing her her breakfast, and with it the intelligence that Sir Hugh had left

the Manor at eight o'clock, but as he did not wish her disturbed, sent a note to her to bid her good-bye. Pike had further news; Mrs. D'Eyncourt had sent a message asking her to take early dinner with her, and that her sons would fetch her at twelve.

Thankful to escape the dreaded meeting, Cecie took care to spin her dressing out till the young D'Eyncourts arrived.

"You don't look well this morning," was Darrell's greeting. Cecie flushed hotly, but made no reply, and somewhat silently they started on their walk.

Through the summer fields they went, chatting gaily and pleasantly. Cecie's spirits revived each moment as she put a greater distance between herself and the Manor. Darrell D'Eyncourt seemed to have a soothing influence over her, which made her forget her troubles while with him.

Oh, what a pleasant day that was ! How happily she roamed through the pretty gardens at Eaglescliff ! How she enjoyed the merry tea on the lawn. She was a little queen amongst them, neither of the young fellows seemed to know how to make enough of her. Edward said openly how he wished she had been his sister ; Darrell was more silent, and did not divulge his thoughts or wishes. Happy ! she was more than that. It was a day to be remembered long after it had passed away. A day to bring a warm glow of memories over her heart, when the world's troubles had chilled it.

Cecie watched how the young D'Eyncourts spoke to their mother, saw the happiness that was among them, how the mother trusted the sons, and how the sons loved the mother. It was the first time she realised what mother-love was ; and as she became better acquainted with the young

men, and saw what nice, thoroughly good fellows they were, she knew instinctively to whom they owed all.

Mrs. D'Eyncourt was seated on a low garden-chair, with Edward lounging at her feet, his elbow resting on her knee, and as she talked she now and again stroked her boy's curly head, not with any ostentatious show of affection, but half unconsciously.

Cecie noticed it, and a pang shot through her.

"Oh," she thought, "had I a mother, how different I could be."

Mrs. D'Eyncourt saw the yearning that was in the girl's heart shining out through her troubled eyes ; for by-and-by she rose and suggested their returning to the house, and while "her boys"—as she called them—were collecting the cushions and rugs, she found a moment to take Cecie aside, and laying a hand on each shoulder said,

"Dear child, you may find it dull at the

Manor sometimes ; when you do, will you come to me ? It will be a real pleasure to me to have you, and I don't say it merely as an empty phrase. Come whenever you can—whenever you like, you poor little lonely thing ; let my boys be brothers to you, and I a——”

Cecie stopped the word on her lips.

“Please don't say that. I could not bear it. I will come often if I may—but——” and she stopped. She could not go on ; she felt she ought to tell Mrs. D'Eyncourt all about her leaving school, before she let her make a friend of her—and she dared not. She had so little brightness before her at that moment, she could not dash what there was to the ground ; so she silently kissed her, and promising to come often, left them.

She went straight to her own room on reaching home, professing to be very tired, and wishing to go to bed ; so she avoided the meeting for yet a few more hours.

When once more by herself, she opened Sir Hugh's letter, which she had not before had time to read. It was, as she had expected, an earnest appeal to her to struggle against her evil propensity, and to overcome it, for the sake of all who loved her.

"Yes," she thought, "I will overcome it. Mrs. D'Eyncourt is the only person who seems to care about me here, and if she came to know, she would not speak to me. Miss FitzAlleyn taught me for some reasons of her own—perhaps because she wanted to keep me out of the way—but if she has blighted my life in one way, she shall not in that also. No, Uncle Hugh, don't be afraid, I have to think of my own interests now, and that would be against them, so you need have no further uneasiness on that score."

Cecie kept her word; would that her resolve had been based upon some better

foundation than self-interest. Poor misguided child, why did your good angel hide her eyes and weep at this, the turning-point in your life, instead of being up and doing, ready to defend you from the enemy that ever lurks by the way?

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. WAED'S AT-HOME.

"WHY Mabel, this is good of you ! I never dared expect you to-night, in fact everyone had decided we should see nothing more of you till your book was out;" and the speaker, a charmingly dressed little woman, rose from amongst a circle of guests to greet handsome Miss Ainsworthy.

"I have been working so hard at my proofs all day," Miss Ainsworthy answered, "that I thought I would give myself a little holiday to-night, and come to you. Now, you vain little woman, don't take all the compliment to yourself—though no one else

would have tempted me out. A great reason for coming was, that I knew that I was certain of meeting two or three people I very much wanted to see, besides yourself, Fanny."

"Well, whatever your reason, I am glad you did come," Mrs. Waed answered, laughing. She was one of Miss Ainsworthy's best friends, the bright pretty little wife of a famous and staid R.A.

As the two women moved through the rooms, they passed two gentlemen who were chatting idly in a doorway—one a tall handsome man, rather past middle age; the other a good specimen of the "idler" tribe.

"What a superbly handsome woman, Stapylton," the latter remarked, as she swept by them.

"By Jove, yes; and as nice as she is handsome," his companion answered.

Mabel, at this moment seating herself close at hand, raised her eyes and noticed

him. She motioned him towards her, saying in her low sweet voice,

“I am so glad to meet you Sir Hugh, I wanted to hear about Cecie.”

“And I,” he answered, “have wanted to see you on the same subject, but did not like to intrude upon you. I assure you, I quite agree with our hostess in rejoicing that you did come to-night, not only on Cecie’s account, but on my own, as it gives me the opportunity of renewing, and I hope strengthening, a most charming acquaintance.”

Mabel laughed lightly; she was well accustomed to such speeches.

“Yes,” she said, “it was by the merest chance that I came. I was tired of work, and thought a little society would do me good. But how is it I have not seen you here before? Mrs. Waed is one of my oldest friends, and I hardly ever miss one of her evenings.”

Sir Hugh laughed, and looking at her with a mischievous twinkle in his fine eyes replied,

“A friend came to me this morning, and asked me if I had any engagement for this evening. I had but one ball on my list, to which I did not intend going—we old fellows are in the way at dances.”

“Well,” Mabel said, with an amused glance at the handsome, anything but old, face beside her.

“Well,” he echoed, “my friend said: ‘I am going to-night to Waed’s; come with me, you’ll meet most of the celebrities, and if you are lucky, the most charming and most independent woman in London.’ I declined—I thought I should prefer a quiet smoke—so for inducement, he breathed the lady’s name. I need not repeat it to you, Miss Ainsworthy, but merely tell you it acted on me like electricity; it roused me from my apathy, and—here I am.”

Mabel laughed, and yet sighed. She wearied of these conventional fibs.

"When you know me better Sir Hugh, you will know that I have the greatest objection to flattery. I think compliments are good enough for girls in their first season; but to women, they are insults to their common sense."

"But sometimes they are involuntary, and in this instance I but repeated my friend's words."

"Are you sure those words did not undergo a complete metamorphosis in the repetition? I should not wonder if the root of that compliment was not, 'eccentric or blue.'"

"The latter term would in itself be a recommendation. What can be more enjoyable than the society of a well-read woman? As for the former, no one who had had the privilege of meeting you could

apply that. If Miss Ainsworthy is eccentric, the world is mad."

"I believe there are many who call me so. I presume my eccentricity, in their eyes, is love of liberty and independence."

"And why should women not be independent, and in the literal sense of the words 'strong-minded?' For myself, I hate flabby-minded women, with no soul above the day's dinner or the latest novel. It is a real enjoyment to meet women whose minds are so far advanced by education and study, that they can enter into and enjoy, the conversation of clever men."

"Of course," Mabel said with an angry sparkle in her eyes, "cultivate the minds of women, to make them fit associates for men."

"Exactly so; to make them something more than mere playthings. To fit them to be not merely the wives of men, but their friends and companions, the

sharers of all their thoughts, hopes, and aspirations."

"But why should they not cultivate their minds for their own benefit? why should they not strike out a line of their own, independent of men?"

"I think that would hardly be conducive to their happiness—they are naturally dependent upon men. Those who try to follow in men's footsteps, and make their own way in the world, are not always the happiest. They are constitutionally unfit for the daily struggle with life; in many cases they become soured and old before they have reached the prime of their womanhood. I think further, that they would be acting for their own benefit by cultivating their minds; they would make their husbands happier, and through them attain greater happiness themselves."

"But why should their every thought be directed to making men happier?"

“Because it is a woman’s mission to add to the happiness of man. Their lives lie in her keeping. A woman can make or mar a man as she wills. Women rule the universe; there is no sphere, high or low, in which their influence is unfelt. It is surely a glorious mission, a great work that lies before them, so to improve themselves that they may have a better influence on the creatures who are so hopelessly in their power.”

“Naturally—in plain English, all that that comes to, is—educate women to listen to the rubbish their husbands talk. I hate that nonsense about missions—men wrap it up neatly with a few sugar-plums about ruling the universe, and so forth; high-flown sentiments that deceive a good many. A sort of taking-advertisement, kind of business; glaring poster; but taken out of its silver paper and putting aside the sugar-plums, a woman’s ‘mission,’ looked

at from a woman's point of view, is no such tempting and lovely thing. A woman's 'mission' is to be the slave of man. What is termed a womanly woman, from the day of her birth to that of her death, is subservient to the will of man. It's her 'mission' to wait on her brothers, who are good enough to break her in till she is old enough to run in double harness. Her duty then is clearly defined : she has to bear her husband's tempers meekly, keep his house economically, and regulate his servants—in short, take a pride and pleasure in all the daily worries and annoyances of a household : in return for fulfilling her 'mission' zealously, she has sulks and brutality, if there should be a hitch in the domestic machinery. Women who submit to that sort of thing deserve all they get. Why not be independent, and fight for themselves ? and not be in such a tremendous hurry to marry, and put their necks under the yoke. Again, if

they are married, why not preserve their own dignity, and force their husbands to treat them with the same respect they would show any other lady? If the master is displeased with his dinner, let him ring for the cook and rate her; but he has sense enough to know the cook would not stand it, but promptly give her month's warning; so he takes refuge in abusing his white slave, the only servant on his premises who can't give notice and leave; the only being he dares to show his real temper to. I despise men; they are such cowards, and above all so deceitful. You may know them intimately for ten years, but never understand their true character till you belong to them, and escape is impossible."

"Oh Mab, Mab!" cried lively Mrs. Waed, who in passing had caught the last sentence; "you inveighing against men! You are the last woman who ought to, considering the hopeless worship they are

always paying at your shrine. You know, you naughty woman, you are the most terrible coquette in London."

"And I hope to continue so," Mabel answered viciously. "I enjoy hearing stories of broken hearts—so called—when they are about the sterner sex. Men in the aggregate get so much the best of it, that it affords me real pleasure to feel that in my own circle I can count some who have been considerably worsted."

Sir Hugh sighed deeply.

"I'll own Miss Ainsworthy, that many men do deserve your vengeance, from the light way they hold the love they have often been at great pains to obtain, but I think women have far greater power of ruining men's lives than they care to allow. An unprincipled woman can hold a man in bondage for his whole life, can put beyond his reach all that makes life dear to others, can turn all the sweets of life to bitterest

gall, and make him long wearily for the one thing that can free him from his burden—death.”

“And this through no fault of his own?” Miss Ainsworthy asked half scornfully, and yet evidently with deep interest.

“Yes, through the fault of loving where he could not esteem, through too great deference for the wishes of others—in fact, through weakness of character.”

He folded his arms and bowed his head on his chest, but Mabel could see the stern set of the jaw, as though crushing down some emotion. She felt such a strange interest in him that she could not refrain from saying,

“Sir Hugh, you are speaking of yourself.”

He started, confused and agitated.

“Of myself! Did I say so? No, oh no; you quite mistake me. Let us speak of something else. When may I come and see you about Cecie?”

"Forgive me for appearing curious," she said, "your story so interested me that I involuntarily asked the question. About Cecie, I have some friends coming to dinner the day after to-morrow; will you join us?"

"I shall be most happy if I may do so, but shall I be trespassing too much on your kindness if I ask you to let me call on you to-morrow afternoon for a little quiet chat?"

"I shall be very pleased if you will come about four, and I shall be certain to be at home."

Mrs. Waed again came to Miss Ainsworthy's side.

"Now, Mab dear, if you have finished your imprecations, will you give us some music? Sir Hugh, will you take Miss Ainsworthy to the piano?"

Mabel went willingly to oblige her friend, and was soon delighting them with her rich

lovely contralto ; but the *tête-à-tête* thus broken up, not another word did Sir Hugh get with her till she was leaving, then, calmly pushing through the crowd of admirers who surrounded her, he carried off the coveted prize to her carriage. He lingered, leaning on the door.

"Then I am to have the pleasure of seeing you to-morrow?" he asked.

"Rather say to-day," Miss Ainsworthy smiled, drawing a furry cloak round her handsome shoulders.

"Yes, to-day ; that is a nearer, sweeter word than to-morrow," Sir Hugh said, as he absently watched her ; then he said suddenly, "you are crushing your flowers."

"Yes ! why not ?" she answered with a careless glance at a bunch of *stephanotis* that nestled in the bosom of her lace dress ; "they have lived their life for me."

"But not for me, if you will only give

them to me. I should keep them and prize them."

"Till you reached home, when you would toss them into your grate, with a laugh at me, and my folly in giving them."

"If you will give them me, I shall keep them in memory of a happy meeting," he responded gravely.

Miss Ainsworthy hesitated, and he pleaded earnestly,

"My happy moments have been so few, give them to me in memory of one bright evening in my life? Pray do not refuse me."

The man who hesitates is lost; but the woman who hesitates invariably is saved. Mabel hesitated, and gave time for pride to come to her rescue. Drawing her cloak savagely around her, she said;

"I am a little sceptical about you prizing them, and as I feel convinced they will

inevitably be tossed aside, I prefer doing that myself. Good-night."

Rather regretting her coldness, she looked from the window as she drove on to bow and smile, and saw Sir Hugh in the act of raising something from the pavement and of pressing the unknown object to his lips.

"I wonder what that was," Mabel thought; and discovered that a glove was missing.

"He must have found it," she thought, and a soft light stole into her glorious eyes; then she laughed scornfully, saying,

"Surely, Mabel Ainsworthy, you are not thinking of falling in love!"

Sir Hugh's words, as he kissed the little glove, would have somewhat startled her had she heard them.

"Oh," he cried, "that one of us had never beheld the light of this day!"

CHAPTER VII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Two long weeks had passed away, and Cecie was finding her life a very hard and wretched one. She felt as if she were living two lives : on the one hand were the D'Eyncourts, the warm affection of the brothers and the tender true love of their mother always rousing in her all that was best and truest in her nature ; and on the other the wearing care which pressed upon her daily and hourly. That secret which she had discovered seemed as though it would wear away her life ; it never left her, but was ever present night and day,

night and day. Beyond all this was the constant never-varying disgust of the two aunts, who never failed to show her how much she was in their way, nor how heartily they wished her back at school or at the bottom of the sea. Lyn invariably addressed her as the "Incubus." All this unnatural strain was telling on her health and spirits, and Cecie was getting paler and thinner, till she looked like a little sad visitant from another world.

She had no one to whom she could confide this trouble. Miss Ainsworthy, in compliance with a request of Sir Hugh Stapylton's, wrote to her frequently; long, kind, almost loving letters, that did her a great deal of good in helping to keep the best side of her character always to the fore, but even to this good friend Cecie could not confide her secret. She had gone to Miss Ainsworthy's as a girl of

family ; she had boasted much about her people while she was there. How then could she write and tell her she was nobody's child—a nameless disgrace ? No, Cecie felt sure that if she wished to keep what friends she had, that secret must be buried for ever in her own breast. As soon as opportunity offered she would marry, and then the poor foolish child thought all her troubles would be ended. The idea of the deceit she intended to practise never troubled her. Cecie's moral code was not a high one. Her training had not been of the kind likely to foster the higher nature.

Mrs. D'Eyncourt, who really liked the poor child, began to get anxious about her ; and though she personally regarded the FitzAlleyns with distrust and dislike, she was anxious to do all in her power for Cecie, so begged her aunts to let her come to Eaglescliff for a month or two, to see if

young companionship would restore the colour to her cheeks, and the light to her eyes.

If Mrs. D'Eyncourt disliked the Fitz-Alleyns, those ladies absolutely detested her. Maud in especial, felt her own sense of inferiority more with that quiet gentle woman than with any other of her neighbours, and set it down to some haughty manner of Mrs. D'Eyncourt's own. When the kind old lady asked her to let Cecie visit Eaglescliff for a time, Maud was so patronising and gracious that twice Mrs. D'Eyncourt felt inclined to walk straight out of the house and leave Cecie to her fate. Her kind heart conquered, and it was arranged Cecie was to go.

A few days passed ; the girl enjoyed herself as she thought she never should have done again. Riding with one or both of the brothers in the morning, lounging through the afternoons, going for long delicious

drives when the evenings cooled—it was a time to be long remembered.

Darrell gave all his time to her—at least so much of it as was not monopolised by his mother.

Cecie noticed with wonder how tender those two young fellows were to their mother; they were more like daughters to her than sons. They never seemed to care to be out of her presence; and when with her, watching her with the most earnest attention, supplying her every want, and if a shadow crossed her quiet resigned face, doing all in their power to chase it away.

Cecie had grown to regard them as her dearest friends. She loved Mrs. D'Eyncourt warmly and tenderly, and the two brothers she looked upon as though they were her own. She accepted Darrell's attention with a frank careless manner that showed his mother in what light she regarded him; and

though the mother felt sorry for her boy, who, she could see, was on the verge of loving their lonely little neighbour, yet she felt a strong sense of relief that it was so. It would have been hard to her to thwart her boy's wishes; but, fond as she was of Cecie, it would have been harder still to share the ancient name of D'Eyncourt, with one whose lineage was more than doubtful, and about whom she felt convinced there was a cloud of mystery.

Darrell was not discouraged by Cecie's frank easy manner, he guessed she did not yet know what love was, and looked forward to the happiness he would have in awakening the first love in her breast.

One morning the mother and Cecie were left alone. Darrell and Edward had gone to a cricket match; as a natural sequence the conversation fell on the absentees.

"What are they going to be, Mrs. D'Eyncourt?" Cecie asked.

“Going to be, dear?” the mother queried.

“Yes, I suppose Darrell is too old to go into the army, so he won’t be a colonel like his father.”

Mrs. D'Eyncourt dropped her work into her lap, and raising her eyes to heaven, said fervently, .

“I pray they may neither of them in any way resemble their father.”

There was a pause. The ladies were sitting in the sunny garden, the spreading branches of a fine old oak sheltering them from the midday sun. Cecie gazed about her at the flowers, watched the butterflies at play, and had half forgotten her question when Mrs. D'Eyncourt spoke again. She was so startled at the agitated voice, that she gazed hurriedly round, and saw her kind friend’s face ashy pale, her lips quivering; unbidden tears rising to the soft eyes.

“I hope never to lose my boys,” she said

"Edward will have all my property when I die, and Darrell will have quite a princely income when his father dies."

Cecie started.

"I thought you—— Is not your——?" and then she stopped in confusion.

"Have you not heard my story?" Mrs. D'Eyncourt asked gravely. "My child, you and I are to be friends, are we not?" and as Cecie slipped her hand into hers in token of acknowledgment, she added, "then we owe each other an explanation. I will tell you the story of my life, and you must be equally candid with me Cecie. I tell you frankly dear, there are some things I cannot quite understand about you, and which I want made clear before I can be quite sure that we are friends."

Cecie's face turned ashen white. Was she going to question her about her parents?

“What do you wish to know about me?” she asked hoarsely.

“Don’t put it in that way, my darling child. I can’t help seeing that you have some heavy trouble. I don’t want you to think I am prying into your secrets, but if it would be any relief or comfort to you to tell it to me, believe me dear child, I will give you my warmest sympathy and advice, you poor little motherless darling.”

“Motherless!” Cecie repeated, and then broke out sobbing.

“Did you never know her, darling?” Mrs. D'Eyncourt pursued, quite unconscious of the dagger she was thrusting to the hilt in the girl's heart.

Cecie was silent. Dare she throw herself on her friend's breast, and there confess her trouble—confess herself the base-born daughter of a burlesque actress? or should she keep to the lie that had been taught her

so soon as she could lisp? If she told the truth, would Mrs. D'Eyncourt grow cold and strange to her? Should she thus lose the only friend she had? It would be so she felt convinced, but how was she to deceive this woman who was so kind and good to her?

The question came again from Mrs. D'Eyncourt, but this time in colder tones—she feared her surmises were correct, and read Cecie's silence as embarrassment. The girl felt the change; her mind was made up instantly.

"No," she said, "my mother died when I was born."

"And your father, dear. Do you remember him?"

"No, not at all. He was a colonel in the 17th Lancers, and, after my mother died, always remained in India. He died many years ago, and made Sir Hugh Stapylton, who was my mother's brother—my guardian,

and Uncle Hugh placed me in the care of Miss FitzAlleyn."

"Are they not related to you then?"

"No," Cecie said, boldly enough—the story once begun, it was so easy to run on. "I only call them aunts from having known them so long."

"Are you fond of them?"

"No; I hate them and their horrid ways," Cecie said vehemently.

"Why then, does your uncle not remove you from their care? I understood from them that your father was a son of the Earl of Wolvermere, and surely a girl of your birth ought to be introduced into society, and not left in a quiet out-of-the-way place like this, with *ladies* like your friends."

For a moment Cecie was completely non-plussed; then she explained confusedly,

"My uncle does not wish me to go into society yet. And there were troubles

at the time of my mother's death, and these people were very kind, and so my mother desired that I might remain with them till I was of age, and arranged the money so and all. Please don't ask me what the trouble was. It had to do with money and was very bad."

Mrs. D'Eyncourt kissed her tenderly as she concluded, saying,

"My poor child, I am glad you have told me, for I was always fancying there was some terrible mystery about you; and I longed to know all before I let you wind yourself too closely round my heart. You must let me be a mother to you, Cecie. I am sure I love you almost as dearly as my own boys now;" and with another fond kiss, Mrs. D'Eyncourt drew her seat nearer to Cecie's and began:

"I suppose I must be as candid with you dear child, as you have been to me.

There is a something in you child, that makes me tell you my sad story ; and I feel I ought to tell you, for the sake of my boys. I was married at eighteen to a man whom I worshipped. I have often thought my troubles were sent me because I loved him too dearly. For a few short months we lived together in a perfect dream of happiness ; and then, one day, I discovered that my idol was only clay after all. In a word dear, I found that my husband drank, and would go on at it for months till he would have a perfect fit of madness, and then he would leave off for a short time. When in his senses, he was the most refined and polished of men ; but when under this terrible influence, he would use the most foul language, and at times was so violent that his own servants hardly dared approach him, and violent measures had to be taken to prevent him doing himself a serious mischief.

“Imagine, if you can, the terrible life I led. It was one struggle to conceal his shame from the eyes of the world. Hardly returning my wedding visits, I gave up all society; and people gave me credit for being so fond of my husband, that I cared for no other society than his; but, far from loving him, I had come almost to hate him. I had a fixed purpose before me; I set myself steadily to reclaim my poor husband; I tried day by day to recall him to his better, nobler self. But all in vain; he either could not or would not heed me.

“A little son was sent to me, and I became more reconciled to my sad lot. I nursed and loved my baby, and felt life was not so bitter as it had at first seemed to me. I was not however, even to find happiness in him, for my husband grew jealous, and began to upbraid me for neglecting him for our boy, and told me

that had I only loved him, he would have tried to be a better man for my sake. This rapidly destroyed all the pleasure I had taken in having my boy near me, and I turned again resolutely to my weary and hopeless task.

“Three years of untold misery went by; years in which I lived in hourly fear for my own life, and for that of my precious Darrell. My husband’s temper was now so morose, when not under the influence of drink, that everyone was in terror of him. Then I had another son, my Edward; but not with the same happy feelings did I welcome his coming as I had welcomed Darrell’s. I dared not show my pleasure in the new-born babe, for fear of rousing my husband’s fierce temper. Instead of being annoyed at the new-comer, he seemed quite pleased with the baby, and offered to take the care of Darrell off the nurse’s hands during my illness. After I was

well he still continued to notice the boy, and would take him into the library with him, show him pictures, and teach him different words. One day, going quietly into the room, I heard him teaching the boy an infant's prayer. Oh, the joy of that hour! I thought my husband was saved, my earnest prayers at last heard; and it indeed seemed so. For nearly three months my husband was his old self again. Oh, what three sunny months they were! All my old love returned in tenfold force; and sometimes, when I sat on the lawn with my husband and my boys, I thanked God for the trouble He had sent me, as it enabled me so much more fully, to glory in my present bliss. But the end came. One day my husband returned with the old flash in his eyes, the old uncertain way of talking, and my heart sank within me, for I felt something terrible was coming. He insisted on Darrell's dining with us.

I was glad he noticed the boy, though I could clearly see he was not in a fit state for his child to look on him.

“Darrell came in to dinner; and when the cloth was drawn and the dessert put on, you can imagine my horror to see my husband fill my boy’s glass with wine to the brim. He turned fiercely on me when I remonstrated, saying he meant to make a man of the child. I would not stay to see my poor darling thus early inoculated with his father’s vice, and withdrew hastily to the drawing-room, whispering to Darrell as I passed him,

“‘If Dal loves mamma he won’t drink that nasty stuff.’

“A few minutes after there was a confusion in the hall, and a scream. I rushed out to find the men crowding round the dining-room door, from whence another scream issued. Then I heard my husband’s voice raised in furious tones, and rushing

through the frightened crowd of servants, I flung the door open just in time to see my husband fling a heavy decanter at my poor boy, the force of the blow sending the child reeling against the wall, and I caught him in my arms as he fell senseless, his little white forehead all cut and bleeding.

“I think a new spirit took possession of me at that sight. Ordering the servants to take Darrell to his nurse, I closed the door, and spoke to the inhuman creature to whom I was bound till death parted us.

“I don’t know what I said. In those few minutes all the pent-up wrongs and miseries of years leapt forth, and I spoke as I had never done before. The weak patient wife seemed to have become a fierce accuser. For a few moments he seemed petrified with astonishment, and then came such a storm of words on either side that even now I shudder to recall the scene. At

last, enraged beyond control, he seized me in his strong grasp, and flinging me from the door, which I was barring against him, rushed from the room.

“For a moment I was helpless; but fear soon brought me to myself. ‘My children!’ I thought, and sped swiftly to the nursery, to find him already there struggling with the nurse for my boy.

“For the time he was utterly mad; and had it not been for the timely arrival of aid, God alone knows what might have happened. Hearing the noise, the men-servants rushed in, and being so well accustomed to the task, soon pinioned and overcame their master.

“In a moment my future course lay clearly before me. I bade the men take him into an adjoining room, and remain locked in with him until he should recover; and knowing these fits were, as a rule, of some hours’ duration, I called all the

rest of the servants to my aid, and set to work to pack everything that belonged to myself or children, and with my babies, nurses, and luggage, left the house as morning dawned. Driving to the station, we took the first train to London, and, with a short delay there, were soon *en route* for a small estate in Wales, which most providentially had, with a comfortable income, been settled on me at my marriage.

“There I was free from my tormentor, and there I felt the first happiness I had known since I had learnt the truth about him.

“At last he found me out, and came down to make terms.

“I had long been expecting him, and felt no surprise when I saw him driving towards the house ; but at once sent nurse and my boys to a room we had singled out for this very purpose. It had two entrances, and therefore two modes of egress, one leading down the great staircase to the hall, and

the other down a small stair, from which a door led directly into a thick part of the shrubbery. After bidding my two trusty men-servants to be ready to come to me the moment I touched the bell, I waited for him.

“Our interview was shorter and more peaceable than I had dared to expect. He urged and entreated me to return to him. I, on my part, refused utterly to comply with his wishes, and told him moreover that if he tried to force me to return, or in any way to seek to see me or my children, I would expose his conduct to the whole world, and get separated from him. He seemed completely cowed ; perhaps he was unprepared for such determination, and left the house saying he would think of what I had said.

“Soon after I had a letter from his solicitor, saying he had been instructed to draw up a deed of separation, which

only needed my signature. I appointed a day, and telegraphed for my own man of business, and we both signed the deed, which, when it was read to me, I found contained a binding promise from my husband to leave all his property at his death to Darrell.

"I wept when I heard this ; it was so much more than I had expected. I had feared he would disinherit the boy.

"Seizing the moment of my softening, he begged to be allowed to see the children again ; and feeling that it was to be for the last time, I sent for them.

"My tears flowed fast as I saw the mournful tender way in which he kissed them, and bade Darrell say 'Papa' for the last time he was ever to hear it. In my heart I felt as if duty called me again to his side, and had he looked near me I fear I should have done so ; so strong is love, and so weak is woman. Happily, he

never even glanced at me, and the soft feeling passed away, and I became stone again.

“Shortly after that we came to live here, and here we have been ever since. My husband is not dead yet, though how he manages to keep life in him, living as he does, is a marvel to me. Still, he lives, and has never broken his word about his boys. You can now well understand why I love my boys so fondly, and why I watch them with such care. I sometimes fear the evil must have been born in them ; so to save them I have told them the same sad story I have told you, and they, dear fellows, seem to strive all in their power to make me forget the sad past, and trust to them for my peace and happiness. Still dear child, fondly as I love my boys, there is plenty of room in my heart for you ; and if you will let me I will try to be to you something like the mother you have lost.”

“Don’t, don’t speak of her!” Cecie cried excitedly.

“But why my child?”

“I shall go mad if you do!” she cried.

“Can you not bear to think of your mother?”

“No,” passionately; “never speak to me of her again. When I hear the name of ‘mother’ I wish I were dead;” and rising hastily, she fled indoors.

When some long while after she sought Mrs. D'Eyncourt, that lady was too perplexed at a subject in hand to notice her guest's swollen eyes, or comment on her strange conduct.

“We shall have quite a gay time, Cecie,” she said; “an old college friend of Darrell's wants to come to us for a short while. I believe he is a very nice fellow, a baronet, and if report speaks truly, a millionaire. I know my bad boys will insist on all sorts of gaiety in honour of

you both, and I am glad for your sake, dear child, that we shall not be so dull as I feared."

Cecie embraced her, assuring her that she had never felt the least in the world dull; but in her heart of hearts she was delighted at the prospect of the visitor. "A baronet and a millionaire," she said to herself. "Why should he not free me from this bitter bondage?"

When Darrell returned and heard the news, he did not appear so delighted at the idea as his mother had expected him to be. In the presence of this friend he foresaw a possible rival.

CHAPTER VIII.

SIR HERBERT MAINWARING.

THE expected guest arrived in due course. Cecie was intensely disappointed to find him a sandy-haired, clumsy fellow, with no sort of manners, and a bearing that would have been better fitted for a stable than a drawing-room. Cecie had expected as polished a gentleman as her uncle, and this coarse individual was an unpleasant surprise to her. Still, he was Sir Herbert Mainwaring, of Mainwaring Hall, and was not a man to be despised; he was very rich, and a baronet to boot, and Cecie had not been to school without learning

the value of a rich *parti*; so she dressed herself in her most becoming style, and decided that through this most unpromising youth she would have a struggle for emancipation.

When the evening was over, and the young men were having their post-prandial pipe before retiring to rest, Sir Herbert observed,

“By Jove Darrell, what a pretty little girl that is !”

“Do you think so ?” he answered carelessly, though his face flushed angrily at the free-and-easy manner in which his friend mentioned her.

“Yes ; there’s breed about her I should think, though for my part a little of her society would go a long way. She’s rather too bread-and-butter for my taste ; rides ‘a little,’ but never hunted ; and don’t know the points of a horse. It seems to me that if it weren’t for that pretty face

of hers she would find herself rather in the background. She's a neat figure, and——"

"Really Mainwaring, I must beg of you to exclude Miss De Vere from our conversation, unless you can speak of her in more respectful terms."

"Phew!" whistled the baronet, making a sign at Edward. "So the land lies that way, does it? Sweet on her, eh? Well, my dear fellow, don't fear for me. I promise not to poach on your preserves. I like something with a little more go in it. Fun is all very well, but I like wit my boy, wit."

"Having so little of it yourself," chimed in Edward, to avert the storm he saw gathering on his brother's brow.

Sir Herbert rose, and seizing Ned by the collar, gave him a playful shaking, saying, as he tossed him off into a chair,

"If you were not a minor and therefore

not accountable for your actions, I'd have you out for that little speech."

"Bloodthirsty man, avaunt!" Ned cried, striking a tragic attitude. "To one of my tender years, I wonder you have the heart to mention pistols and coffee for two, at the Hôtel Quelque chose, Boulogne-sur-Mer."

Darrell could not help laughing at the way Ned delivered his speech.

"You were born for the stage," he laughed.

"The stage!" Ned cried; "oh thou whose hits are ever happy, why should we not have a little acting on our own account, to do honour to our two distinguished visitors?"

"The mother would never consent," Darrell said.

"I would add my persuasions to yours, Ned," Mainwaring interposed; "we had some when I was staying in Lincolnshire, and they were really most delightful.

You'll be the lover Darrell, I the heavy villain, Ned the inquiring youth who is always looking after everybody's business, and little Miss What's-her-name the artless maiden, who can make big eyes at everyone, and trip about with nothing to say for herself till the climax, when she will fall into Darrell's arms, and Ned and I jostle each other to bless the happy pair. There now, I've done it again! Darrell's looking so thunderous that I had better make off before the storm bursts. Good-night!"

Darrell felt it impossible to be angry with his friend, he was so jovial and good-natured; but still he felt annoyed at the slighting way he seemed to speak of Cecie.

The days wore on, and Sir Herbert kept his word. He amused himself a great deal with Cecie when there was nothing better to be done, or he felt dull, and the

girl very soon discovered that though he flirted lightly with her, he was not fascinated by her, nor was he likely to become so.

When the first disappointment had worn off she rather liked him; he was genial and honest, if rough and rather uncouth; and though he showed signs of violent temper and sulky disposition, she would gladly have overlooked them had he seemed much taken with her. She did not care in the least about him, but she thought he could set her free from her bondage.

She never gave Darrell a thought, he was to her a nice kind brother; but he, foolish boy, could not or would not understand it, believing that she must love him because he loved her.

Mrs. D'Eyncourt gave in to the importunities of the young folks, and had consented to charades or tableaux vivants, and had herself suggested that this amuse-

ment should follow a garden party, and the week after promised them a ball for Cecie's birthday. She was almost forced to regret her clemency during the time that intervened, for all the worry and management of the whole affair devolved on her. Not only was she assailed by her own family as to postures and costumes, but, her taste being so good, letters were constantly coming from the other participators in the tableaux, begging for her ideas on such and such a subject.

At last however, all was arranged, and the day of the garden party arrived—a gloriously fine one. Cecie, becomingly arrayed in pink cambric, flitted hither and thither, as happy as a queen.

Crossing the lawn, she was met by Sir Herbert, carrying a delicate bunch of white flowers. Dropping on one knee before her, he laughingly presented them, with the words,

“To the fairest of the fair.”

Cecie blushed as she took them, saying half resentfully,

“I wish you did not always talk such nonsense.”

“On my honour,” he said, “it was not nonsense. I would bet five pounds you will be the prettiest girl here to-day. I salute you as the queen of beauty;” and he raised her hand to his lips, as he did so gazing in her face with a glance, half of merriment, and half of amusement.

Of course Ned arrived on the scene at this most inopportune moment, and Cecie could only wonder whether he had really meant what he said, or had only been laughing at her.

Darrell had watched the scene from one of the windows, and ground his teeth with rage at the quiet way in which she endured the hateful salute. He determined such a thing should not occur

gain, and that he would speak to her every day.

"L'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose." Darrell found a tennis party not at all the opportunity for making sweet confidences. Cecie was in the midst of all the mirth and fun, and he found it quite impossible to say two words to her.

"Presently," he promised himself; and endured pangs of jealousy as he saw her surrounded by a crowd of admirers, but everywhere followed by Mainwaring as by her shadow.

That astute youth had soon discovered that Cecie undoubtedly was the prettiest girl there, and being one of those men who value people by the way others esteem them, no sooner did he see her courted and admired by everyone, than he established himself as *cher ami*, and wondered at himself for being so long in finding her such an attractive girl.

"I'll show these yokels they can't easily cut out London men," he thought, and set himself the agreeable task of flirting desperately with the "little one," and succeeded in duly impressing the "yokels" that there was something between him and Miss De Vere.

The Misses FitzAlleyn of course were present. They were gorgeously attired in the latest fashion ; Lyn in a gown of gray plush of wondrous build, and so tightly made that breathing became an art. Little blue bows were dotted all about it, and gave it a very youthful appearance.

Both ladies smiled placidly at the evident attention the unknown youth was paying Cecie.

"Fancy, if it's a chance of shifting the Incubus !" Lyn suggested, in soft accents.

"I wonder who he is, and if he is worth hunting up ?" Maud responded. "If he pays her as much attention at the dance on

Tuesday, I should think I might seek an introduction, and ask his intentions. What do you think?"

"That it would be a trifle premature, and if he got off, would prevent anyone else going near her. However, I'll go and get to know who he is; and dear, if you are introduced before I return, say very little, and pray don't laugh."

"What do you mean?" Maud demanded.

"Well, you know dearest, you *are* vulgar, and to those who are not accustomed to it, your laugh is too hearty and too loud to be ladylike. Oh Maud," with a deep sigh, "how much better we might have done if you had only been more refined!"

"Like you are I suppose, so wonderfully refined that you don't know the truth from a lie. I wonder where you would have been if I had not educated you, and paid for your fine finikin manners? Of course

you are ungrateful—that I expected ; but I have my reward in other ways. When I look at you and your fine ways, I always have the satisfaction of thinking that, if paying for a thing makes it yours, they are certainly mine, for they cost me a pound a week when, to tell you the honest truth Lyn, I was only making thirty shillings.”

“ Well,” Lyn responded, “ don’t let us spoil the charm of getting rid of the Incubus by quarrelling. You are a good kind soul, but you are vulgar, and you know it. Take my advice, and keep as quiet as you can until something is settled. I have heard that a baronet has been staying with Madam D’Eyncourt, and if this is the man, and he slips through our fingers, Cecily ought to be flogged for not writing and telling us about him.”

Lyn disappeared, and Maud was left to her own devices. She thought the

advice just received good, so decided to follow it till she heard the report on Cecie's admirer.

She turned into a shady walk, very quiet, and apparently unfrequented. She found a seat and amused herself building airy castles, from the windows of which she could, on a clear day, with the aid of a powerful telescope, get a faint glimpse of a clump of trees which surrounded the house wherein dwelt Cecie, with a well-to-do husband.

Suddenly she heard voices approaching—Cecily's and that of a man. She strained her ears to catch what they were saying, and as they seemed passing behind the group of shrubs where she was sitting, she rose and advanced amongst the shrubs, hoping to hear more clearly.

"Cecily," the man was saying; "what a sweet name it is. Cecie! I wish I might have the privilege of calling you Cecie!"

Maud, straining her ears for the reply, received a violent push in the back, and, turning angrily round, saw Lyn looking greatly agitated.

"Come away Maud, they'll see you in a moment! He's a rich baronet, and everyone thinks desperately gone over her. They'll be upon us in a moment; we must feign not to see Cecie; the girl's sharp enough to see we don't want to be seen; but for goodness' sake don't let us be introduced before he has proposed."

"Yes, I daresay you're right, and we don't want him to cry off;" and Maud hurried to reach another clump of trees, as a flutter of pink came in sight.

"He certainly would 'cry off,' if he saw us; he's a man of the world, and would see the brand on us; would know us for *ci-devant* actresses."

"Miss FitzAlleyn," a voice behind them said, "I have not had the pleasure of a word

with you yet. Don't hurry away so fast; your niece and my oldest friend are just approaching."

It was Darrell D'Eyncourt. How much he had heard they could not tell; but they felt confused and in his power. Neither lady could do more than murmur a monosyllable, and wait till Cecie reached them.

Darrell had in reality lost the whole of Lyn's speech. He had heard them planning to get out of the way before the baronet reached them, lest he might not approve of their appearance; and, as Darrell most heartily wished his friend would "cry off," he determined to bring a meeting about.

When Cecie saw them she would fain have turned back; but she was too near them to make such an act possible, so put the best face on the matter, shook hands with her aunts, and stood silently by while Sir Herbert was introduced. Lyn's instructions proved invaluable. Miss FitzAlleyn

neither laughed nor spoke, but left Lyn to coo in her gentle way for them both.

Sir Herbert was evidently not too charmed with the ladies. Cecie saw at once that he had estimated them rightly, and when they moved towards the tennis lawn was not unprepared for the remark,

"I thought you belonged to the Wolvermere family?"

"So I do," Cecie answered readily; "my father was the earl's third son."

"Your mother was a sister of Sir Hugh Stapylton's?" was the next inquiry.

"Yes; why do you ask? Did you know her?" Cecie asked trembling.

"No; I was only wondering on which side you were related to the Misses FitzAlleyn."

"Related to them!" Cecie cried in horror. "Oh, they are no relatives of mine, only people I live with. I say 'Aunt' because I have known them such a very long time."

"Humph," the young man said to himself, "they are queer guardians for a girl of position! There's a screw loose somewhere;" and to Cecie's great chagrin he perceptibly fell off in his attentions.

Lynn, who was much too anxious to be rid of the Incubus to mind a little present trouble, very soon saw the change in his manner, and by a not very subtle process of reasoning came to the conclusion, that if the quarry was started at the very sight of them, he would take wings and disappear entirely if he had the honour of a few moments' gentle banter with her sister. Knowing full well that persuasion or remonstrance would alike be useless to get her away, Lynn was suddenly overcome with heat and fatigue, and became so alarmingly ill that she was obliged to go home, and of course Maud went with her.

For the sake of the servants she was helped out of the carriage, divested of her

costume, and placed on a cosy sofa in Maud's boudoir. With astonishing talent she kept up the deception till it was too late for Maud to return alone ; and at last, in reply to Maud's reiterated inquiries, she suddenly sat upright and answered,

"My good sister, I never was better in my life ; but I wanted to get you away, so shammed faintness. We should have lost our chance had we stayed, as it is I feel nervous about her. Anyway, we won't go to the ball."

Miss FitzAlleyn's reply is not on record, it is better understood than expressed.

CHAPTER IX.

The fruit that will fall without plucking
Is rather too ripe for me.

THE tableaux were a great success. Every one of them had gone off without a hitch. The actors were full of pride, and the audience enjoying themselves, when the curtain rose on the last. It was "The Huguenots," represented by Cecie and Darrell.

Very lovely the girl looked, in her rich black velvet dress, her golden hair seemed brighter than ever against the sombre coat of her lover. She had entered into the spirit of it, heart and soul, and her face wore a tender pleading look, as her slim

fingers essayed to fasten the badge. Gradually the expression on her face seemed to be reflected on Darrell's, and the picture was perfect. For some moments there was deep silence, and then came an enthusiastic burst of applause which threatened to upset the tableau entirely. Twice it was recalled, and as Cecie for the last time freed herself from Darrell's embrace he whispered,

"I have something to say to you ; linger after the others, and I will meet you here."

With a murmured assent Cecie moved away, and by the door met Sir Herbert, his bright face clouded, and looking somewhat angry.

"How did you like 'The Huguenots'?" she asked.

"Like it?" he returned savagely. "It's good asking *me* that! Of course, there is nothing I enjoy more than seeing another fellow's arm round you."

"What do you mean?" she demanded, a thrill of triumph trembling through her, her breath coming quick and fast as she waited for the next speech.

"Mean!" he echoed roughly, "why, that I've had enough of this, and am going to bed. I think I had better say good-bye, Miss De Vere, for I'm off in the morning."

"So suddenly! Oh, don't go," she said, feeling far from displeased at the turn affairs seemed taking.

"I'd better," he rejoined sulkily.

"Do change your mind; I hope you will." She passed out of the room and along a dimly-lighted passage, pausing at the foot of some stairs leading to her room.

"Don't go," she pleaded.

"Well," he said, taking her hand, "I won't go if you will make a small sacrifice to keep me. Indeed, I think you owe me something for flirting so desperately with Darrell."

"What is it?" she asked, smiling, and not withdrawing her hand.

"Give me a kiss," he said, drawing her towards him.

She paused a moment to reflect, and then, thinking herself so secure of him, lifted her lips to his, and fled up the stairs.

"Well!" said the young man to himself, "I declare I thought better of her! I wonder what Darrell would think if he knew that I had only gone to the very edge of his preserves, and the game had come flying to me to be slaughtered! If he gets her I wish him joy; but it's taught me a lesson. If ever I want to marry a girl, I won't ask her to kiss me on the sly. If she did I should hate her, and if she didn't I should not like it, so I think I had better leave it alone;" having arrived at which logical conclusion the baronet returned to the ball-room.

Cecie dressed in a great flutter of excitement, and as she cast a last look at herself in the mirror, she said,

“When next I look at you Cecie, you will be the future Lady Mainwaring.”

Tripping gaily down the stairs she remembered her promise to meet Darrell, and as she approached the library, she saw him standing in the gloom looking stern and reproachful. A guilty flush overspread her face.

“I forgot—I mean I hope you have not been waiting for me.”

“No,” he answered coldly, “I found that one minute’s conversation with Mainwaring seemed to drive all thoughts of me out of your head, so I dressed myself and returned here to speculate whether it would ever occur to you to remember me.”

“Oh Darrell, how unkind you are!”

“Am I more so than you?”

“I did not mean to be, indeed,” she

said earnestly, feeling so happy herself that she did not wish to cause anyone pain. "I was only in a hurry, and—and forgot."

"I felt it deeply, the more so that I had something of great importance to say to you."

"What was it?" she asked carelessly, buttoning her glove as she spoke.

"Is that the way to treat serious matters?" he said passionately. "I fear the time is ill chosen, but I cannot delay longer, I must tell you to-night what is in my heart. I love you Cecie, will you be my wife? You must have seen every day, every hour, how I loved you. Did you not know what I would say to you that you asked me thus carelessly?"

Cecie sank on a chair; she was completely overwhelmed; she had never expected this.

Darrell fancied his vehemence had

frightened her, and bending over her, said tenderly,

“Forgive me, Cecie, I have alarmed you ; but if you can for one moment realise the depth of my love for you, you will pity and pardon me. Take this weight of anxiety and doubt from me. My darling, I love you, will you trust your future in my hands, and be my fondly-cherished wife ?”

He paused and waited for her reply, but it came not.

Cecie was in the deepest perplexity. She had kissed Sir Herbert, but then, after all, what was a kiss—and Darrell had proposed and Sir Herbert had not as yet. She was quite alive to the truth of the old saying about “a bird in the hand” being worth “two in the bush ;” and yet she had an uncomfortable feeling about that kiss. If she accepted Darrell she would have to tell him, and there would

be a fuss; and Darrell was so strict, perhaps when she did tell him he would make a fuss with Sir Herbert, and break it off with her. Had it not been for that unlucky kiss she would have accepted him, but as things were she thought herself bound to wait for Sir Herbert to speak. Then Darrell would be so rich, and she loved his mother; but Sir Herbert was a baronet—a sort of doubt fluttered across her mind as to whether Sir Herbert was in earnest; but she dismissed the idea, and determined, to save all bother, to refuse Darrell and wait for his friend. Her silence was so protracted that he spoke again.

"Why are you so silent, Cecie? Is it possible that you doubt what answer to give me?"

"Dear Darrell," Cecie answered, "I am so sorry, so grieved; I had not any idea that you really cared for me." This was strictly true, and she was inwardly much

provoked with herself for being so obtuse. "You have always been so good to me that I would have done anything rather than pain you ; but indeed I never thought of loving you."

"Simple-minded darling!" he exclaimed rapturously. "I saw that the idea of loving had never entered into your innocent heart, and I said to myself, 'When I teach her what love is she will put her hand in mine, and go with me through life's journey.' You don't know what love is ; trust yourself to me, and let me teach you, and one day you will find it wake of itself in your heart. Love begets love, my darling ; and you could not be long loved as I love you, without feeling it stir in your breast. You *will* love me, Cecie ; you are too young to talk of not loving, too young to know the meaning of the word. That kindly feeling which you own to having for me is the seed, the germ, of

that love which I hardly dared hope you already cherished for me."

Again Cecie was silent; it seemed harder than ever to refuse him when he was so kind, so gentle.

"Dear Darrell, you are so good, but I do not—cannot love *you*."

"Do you mean you love another?"

"Yes," she faltered.

"Forgive me, Miss De Vere," he said in his manly, honest way. "Forgive me, and forget what I have said. I had hoped things might have been so different. May I beg of you not to let what I have said cause any coldness between you and my mother—between us all?" And as Cecie murmured a promise, he offered her his arm, and took her to the ball-room.

She could not help noticing how pale and set his face was, but beyond that Darrell showed no sign, and only the eyes that loved him could have detected that

for him all the brightness of the evening had passed away. His mother saw, and guessed what had happened, and now that all anxiety was removed from her mind, was ready to soothe his sorrow, and if she could, would have shared it with him.

Cecie felt sorry for Darrell, and was touched with the quiet way in which he showed her all his customary attentions, with the evident desire to spare her remark of any kind. The evening was, however, a blank to her. Sir Herbert studiously avoided her. At first she thought it was but a fancy of hers, but when she found herself disengaged through one dance, and saw him lounging in a window not far from her, without coming to seek her or speak to her—though he was evidently perfectly aware she was near—Cecie could only draw the one conclusion, that he wished to avoid her.

It was with a tumultuously throbbing

heart she at length sought her room. She had made a mistake and lost them both ! *Après cela la déluge.* Cecie felt as though this were the end of all things, and seeing after this miserable failure only a long weary vista of life at the Manor—she, with that overwhelming hopelessness which only youth can feel—flung herself on her bed to sob herself into a restless slumber.

CHAPTER X.

LANDED.

THE breakfast-table at Eaglescliff on the morning after the tableaux was not the customary festive gathering. Everyone looked tired, Cecie deathly pale, Darrell very quiet and sad.

To use his own expression, Sir Herbert was "seedy" and ill at ease. He had hardly seated himself before he commenced somewhat hurriedly,

"I am very much afraid I shall have to be leaving you to-day, Mrs. D'Eyncourt. There is some business that wants attending to, and I think I ought to go."

"You going!" Cecie exclaimed suddenly, her face flushing crimson, and then becoming paler than before.

The young man turned uneasily from her gaze. The night before he had rallied Darrell on his gravity, and asked him if anything had gone wrong with his innamorata; and Darrell had given him to understand that all was over between himself and Cecie. The memory of that caress on the stairs lay heavily on his conscience, and, like most men when they find themselves cornered, he thought safety lay in flight.

Darrell cast a hasty glance at Cecie, and meeting her eyes, read in them that she did not want his friend to go; and guessing at once that this was the man she loved, he stifled his own feelings and joined with his mother in saying,

"You must not think of going yet, Mainwaring, we can't spare you. Can't

your brother Geoffrey manage your business for you, or can it not be put off for a few days? You are engaged to us for Miss De Vere's ball, and I am sure she will feel hurt if you leave before."

"Do stay," Cecie said timidly, and glancing at him from beneath her long lashes.

"I'd rather not," he blurted out, then stopped himself. "I mean I should be very sorry to offend Miss De Vere, but much as I should like to remain for her ball, I fear I cannot do so, as my business is urgent."

"If you must go we will not try to detain you, though we shall one and all be very sorry to lose you, and shall miss you terribly."

Ned glanced up from a letter he was reading.

"Why Mainwaring, I have a letter here from Geoff, and he sends a special message to you, which I am sure, will set your mind

at rest and keep you with us. 'Tell Herbert the business he mentioned in his last is all satisfactorily settled, and you may add that the place seems to get on better without him than with him. Mrs. Medwin was saying that none of the servants have given warning lately, the cattle are in first-rate condition, and I think all goes better under the sway of a quiet old bachelor, than under that of my harum-scarum step-brother.'"

"I am sure after Mr. Tremayne's most flourishing account, you might give us a few days longer," Mrs. D'Eyncourt said.

"I should like to immensely," the young fellow returned reluctantly; "and if all is as Geoff says, I am afraid—I—I think there is no immediate necessity for my leaving."

Fate seemed against him; he could not get away without appearing uncourteous to friends he valued, so he resigned himself,

making a mental determination to avoid the "young one."

Fate and Darrell, however, seemed altogether against him. Darrell's love was of a peculiarly unselfish character; he knew Cecie was unhappy at home, and her loneliness had at first roused pity for her in his heart, which had later ripened into love. He had hoped to make her happy with him, but as that could not be, he determined to throw no obstacles in the way of another's giving her that happiness which it was denied to him to give her. He fancied she loved his friend, and thinking from Mainwaring's peculiar manner during their conversation the night before, that he too loved her, but feared he had been standing in Darrell's light, he did all in his power to throw them together during the days that intervened before the ball.

Mainwaring was intensely bored and

annoyed at this new state of things. Often he would endeavour to back out of the excursions Darrell was always planning, but Cecie would appear so eager that he could not succeed.

For Cecie, she could not understand the state of affairs at all; though Sir Herbert had now plenty of opportunities, he never spoke, but treated her coldly and distantly. Cecie, remembering that kiss, was intensely chagrined and furious at his treatment.

"He shall not escape me," she vowed, clenching her white teeth. "I will make him speak;" and thus resolved, she only waited for a favourable opportunity.

They were riding along a quiet lane. It was a glorious afternoon, the sun glinting down its golden beams on the glory of the September foliage. In the grassy bank at the side of the road, tiny ferns reared their baby heads, proudly waving their bronzed arms, the first time they had ever known

the glory of wearing this lovely autumn dress, and quite oblivious—poor unconscious mites—that all this finery but betokened their speedy decay; little feathering moss looked up at the sun and smiled; diminutive leaves turned their scarlet ruddy faces heavenwards; the whole was aglow with autumn's wealth. Rarest jewels set in a bed of velvety green.

Overhead the birds sang in the interlacing branches a song full of the present joy, careless of the coming winter.

The air had in it that first frosty breath, so fresh and so exhilarating. The weather had its invigorating effect on Sir Herbert, he was more like his old self than he had been for days. Cecie, watching his every mood with interested eyes, thought the moment favourable, so, leaning to pat her horse's neck, she said with a sigh,

“How time flies!”

“Of course it does to a butterfly like

you, who have only to think of your own amusement," he answered lightly.

"But sometimes it goes too quickly."

"What! You are not content with having every day filled with pleasure, but want to make each one as long as two!"

"No; but it seems hard to see them slipping from you when they are so very precious—so very sweet."

"The days, as a rule, seem quite long enough for me," the baronet answered in a commonplace tone.

"Does it not seem horrid, there are only two more days of delightful anticipation before the ball?"

"Anticipation is only delightful to the young and inexperienced," he answered sententiously. "Middle-aged people far prefer realisation."

"I go home the day after the ball," Cecie said.

"And so do I."

"Shall you be sorry?"

"What for?"

"For leaving everyone."

"Rather," he answered carelessly; "but the change will be good for me. I should get rusty if I always lived in a quiet place like this."

Cecie saw his drift. He wished to steer her away from the broad river, into some little nonsensical tributary of small-talk, so she took the lines into her own hands, and made for mid-stream.

"Have you been enjoying the last few weeks?"

"Immensely—thanks to your society," he answered.

"Thursday was a pleasant day, was it not?"

"I am afraid I have forgotten what Thursday was."

"The day of the tennis party."

"Oh—ah! Yes; it was awfully nice."

"And the tableaux?"

"Yes. If my memory serves me, the tableaux went off charmingly."

"Do you remember nothing else?" she asked, giving a shy glance at him.

"I have a kind of recollection that you flirted with old Day," he answered carelessly, flicking his horse's ears.

"And is that all?" Cecie asked, half pain, half anger in her voice.

"All, Miss De Vere." With a cold look straight into her eyes.

Cecie flushed and paled, then striking her horse a fierce cut, started off at a sharp gallop, which she took care not to lessen till they were close home.

Alone in her own room Cecie sat down to think. Should she pursue this, or should she let him alone when he so evidently did not want her? She shrank from the part she was playing, and yet she could not make up her mind to give all up. His

name would put her in her proper position ; his money would free her from her *aunts*. No, she would go through with it, and force him to speak.

She changed her tactics. She studiously avoided him, managed to evade rides or walks if he was of the party, and took care to show him plainly he was in disgrace, and gained the object she had in view—that of making him intensely dull. Had she been an old diplomatist she could not have devised a wiser expedient ; he missed her society, and thought a good deal about her. He tried to make her notice him by every means in his power, but she seemed utterly indifferent to him, and contrasting her present conduct with the pleasure she used to take in his society before, he got piqued and annoyed at it.

Matters stood thus when the day of the ball arrived. Cecie's mind was in a state of blissful serenity, and the reasons of it were


various. The first occurrence that tended towards it was the early arrival of a groom from Sibthorp Manor, bearing a note for Mrs. D'Eyncourt, and a packet for Cecie. The note was to signify the extreme distress of the Misses FitzAlleyn that they were obliged to deprive themselves of the pleasure of being present at the ball so kindly given for their darling's birthday, but that, in consequence of Miss Evelyn FitzAlleyn's illness, which showed some signs of returning, they were afraid to venture out.

The packet for Cecie contained a very handsome set of pearls from her aunts, and two smaller parcels, which proved to be a beautiful diamond ring from Sir Hugh, and a locket from Miss Ainsworthy of exquisite workmanship, which was accompanied by a kind letter—another to add to the already large store Cecie had of her letters. Other causes of gratulation were some charming presents from the D'Eyncourts; but by

far the most precious was a small bouquet she found on her toilet-table, when she went to dress; for on a slip of paper attached to it were the words: "Please wear it, Cecie.—H. M." She smiled triumphantly, but put it aside in a vase; and when she emerged from her room, looking very lovely in her snowy silk and lace dress, the only flower she wore was a delicate creamy rose, which she had gathered herself.

They were all assembled in the drawing-room as she entered, fanning herself as she moved to prevent Mainwaring from seeing at the first glance whether she was wearing his flowers.

He evidently concluded that she was, for a bright smile overspread his face, and he advanced a step towards her. Without appearing to notice him she lowered her fan, and watched him covertly. With a



look of angry disappointment he turned away, and a moment after left the room.

Later in the evening, when the dancing was in full swing, he returned, and, going straight to Cecie, asked for a dance.

"I am afraid I have not one left," she answered coldly.

"Will you allow me to see your card?"

"Certainly."

His brow darkened as he scanned it.

"I fear you have not studied it well; you have three disengaged. With your permission, I will place my initials against them;" and bowing, he left her.

He felt deeply hurt. He had not meant to offend her, and could not see why she had been making the last few days of his stay so uncomfortable; and he determined to have it out with her. He had not the most remote intention of making love to her, but he liked her as a companion, and

she had led him to believe she liked him, and it seemed incomprehensible to him that she should now treat him so coldly, and refuse to wear his flowers, when ten days ago she would have accepted them with pleasure.

The dance came round. Almost before the first strains had begun he was at her side.

"I think this is our dance ; do you care to dance it, or would you prefer a stroll in the conservatory ?"

"It is a waltz, is it not ?"

"Yes."

"Then I think I would rather dance it."

They whirled away ; both were good dancers, and passionately fond of it. Sir Herbert's anger melted like snow before the sun as they floated along in unison with the tender strains of "Le Premier Baiser."

"Is not this a divine waltz ?" he said.

"Waldteufel has done ample justice to his theme."

"What is the theme?" she asked carelessly.

" 'Le Premier Baiser.' "

Her colour rose, and she answered coldly,

"Yes, it's a charming air, but the theme is absurd."

"Absurd!" he said, looking into her eyes; "you did not think so ten days ago."

"I have forgotten," she murmured.

"But I have not," he said, losing his discretion in the warmth of the moment. "As if I could ever forget your lifting your lips to mine and giving me such a jolly little kiss. It was the first Cecie, but it shan't be the last."

Cecie stopped; they were at the entrance to the conservatory. Mainwaring led her towards it, and with beating heart she entered the dimly-lighted, softly-scented paradise. He was silent till he had found

her a seat, sheltered by some shrubs and camellia-tubs, and seating himself beside her, he spoke :

“I wanted to ask you why you have so persistently shunned me of late. Were you so tired of me that you could not wait patiently for to-morrow ?”

She did not answer, and he went on foolishly, recklessly, not knowing half that he said.

“I thought you were awfully hard on a fellow. You have snubbed me persistently for the last few days, and even refused to wear those few poor flowers. It seemed to me very cruel after the jolly time we have had together, and above all after that kiss.”

“I did not mean to be unkind,” she said ;
“but it was that that made me.”

“What, the kiss ?”

She nodded.

“What in the world has that to do with it ?”

"Oh," Cecie said tearfully, "I thought you were vexed with me."

"Vexed? Why?"

"Because you thought I ought not to have given it you."

"Discriminating damsel!" Mainwaring thought, but he was not sufficiently master of himself to see her drift and save himself, so plunged recklessly on.

"On the contrary, I thought it was very kind of you, and only wish you would give me another."

"Don't talk like that, it hurts me," Cecie said; and, burying her face in her laced handkerchief, she sobbed gently.

What was Mainwaring to do? He was but human; there she sat beside him, her white shoulders heaving, her golden head buried in her pretty hands. He felt he should be little better than a savage if he did not try to console her. Slipping his arm round her slim waist, he drew

her head on his shoulder, and whispered soothingly,

“Why are you crying, Cecie?”

“Because you despise me. Because I ought not to have kissed you!” she half raised her face as she spoke. In a moment he was kissing her trembling lips.

“Indeed, Cecie, I do not.”

“I—I don’t want you to think badly of me, and indeed I would not have kissed you if I had not cared for you, and I have been so miserable—but,” softly returning his kiss, “I am so happy now.”

“Are you?” he cried, awakening with horror to the construction she was putting on his actions.

“Yes, for I know you love me.”

There was a dead silence. Had Mainwaring followed his inclinations, he would have put the golden head from his shoulder, and with haste have left her, and let her think what she liked of him; but he could

not do that, and sat silent and still, wondering how in the world he was to get out of this mess.

"Miss De Vere," he began, but she interrupted him.

"Don't say Miss De Vere, call me Cecie."

"Well then, Cecie, I am afraid you have misunderstood me."

Cecie sprang to her feet, and stood before him, looking like a young tigress.

"Misunderstood you! Do you mean to tell me that all you have said is false, that you do not love me, but have wrung an avowal of my love for you from me, merely as a pastime? How dare you? It was mean, base, ungentlemanly, and oh so cruel!" here her voice faltered, and she broke into sobs.

"What in the world have I been saying?" Sir Herbert asked himself. "I can't be sober. I wish to goodness I could see some way out of this scrape."

He could not bear to hear Cecie sobbing in this piteous way, so he gently laid his hand on hers.

She flung it off angrily.

"Do you dare to touch me?" she cried. "I should have thought you had insulted me enough. I will seek Darrell's protection from any further annoyance. He shall know how I have been treated under his mother's roof." Cecie spoke angrily and forcibly; though she did not love this man, she yet felt she had been deceived in him, and her disappointment added a zest and force to her speech which gave it all the appearance of injured love.

Mainwaring's was not a strong or firm character. He was jovial and pleasant when everything went well; morose, and almost savage, when annoyed; but he had not the firmness of disposition necessary to pull him through an emergency like the present. He knew that he had often

entered into light and frivolous conversations with Cecie, and he feared he might at some time or other have said something to lead up to a scene like the present. He stood barring her exit, and running over all the sentimental talks that had taken place between them, and could think of no word or act of his that could have led her to think he cared about her, but the unlucky time when he asked for a kiss.

He was too much a gentleman to think she was exaggerating ; but fancied he must have said some silly thing or other, which she, being young and inexperienced, had construed into love-making.

If it got to the D'Eyncourts' ears they would think he had been behaving in an ungentlemanly way ; and the young fellow flushed at the thought of a Mainwaring ever so slightly tarnishing their time-honoured name.

The only honourable way out of the difficulty seemed to propose to the girl at once. But he did not want to marry ; he wanted his freedom for some few years longer ; he had hardly realised yet the real enjoyments of being young, rich, and a baronet. Besides, when he did marry, his wife must be very different to Cecily de Vere. He would have no shady aunts or anything of that kind in the background.

What was he to do ?

An inspiration suddenly came to him. He would propose now to smooth matters over, then be systematically disagreeable for a time, and wind up with a fearful quarrel which would make reconciliation impossible, and he would be free. He should then keep in with the D'Eyncourts ; have done the right thing in the eyes of the world, and yet not be saddled with a girl he did not care about. He was quite resolved ; and when Cecie once more im-

patiently asked him to let her pass, he said,

“You misunderstood me Cecie. I meant to say I was awfully fond of you, and all that sort of thing; but you took a fellow’s breath away before he had time to speak.”

Cecie was silent. She was quite unprepared for this sudden cold avowal of affection; and, though she instantly attributed it to its right motive, fear of her telling Darrell, she could not think what to say. Pride prompted her to scorn him; but her longing for freedom and dread of returning to live with her aunts, kept her silent.

“You might say something, Cecie,” he said almost roughly. “A minute ago you told me you were fond of me, and now you are silent when I tell you I return your affection.”

Cecie winced at his peculiar manner of

putting it. She knew there was no heart in it; and she longed to tell him so, and leave him with her self-respect uninjured. But the dread of the consequences of such a step was too much for her, and she resolutely shut her eyes to the way she was lowering her own dignity.

"Come," he said, "don't look so sad. I have told you I am fond of you, and you have told me the same, so we know we shall suit one another. Let me see, when people are engaged, they give one another rings, don't they? Take off your glove and see if any of mine fit you."

Cecie held her hand out to him without a word, her heart almost breaking at the insult to her pride she had herself inflicted. Somewhat clumsily he drew off her glove, and taking his rings from his fingers, dropped them in her lap.

"You'd better try them on, and keep the one that fits best."

"No!" Cecie cried; "I can't do that."

"Well then, I must," he said carelessly, and proceeded with his task, till he found one which he decided would "do." Then restoring his rings to their appointed places, "that's all settled," he said; "now put your gloves on, Cecie, and let us go back to the ball-room, we've been away an awful time."

"It has seemed short to me," Cecie said reproachfully, determined now that she had virtually accepted him to make believe she was content.

"Of course it's been immensely happy to me," he answered, drawing her hand through his arm and leading her back to the ball-room.

She caught sight of herself in a mirror as she passed, and started to see how pale she looked. She tried to feel happy as she gazed at the future Lady Mainwaring, but a shudder ran through her as she

glanced at the man who was to give her the title.

"He does not love me now," she thought, "and in time he will hate me;" but she thrust the thought aside. "I shall be free," she said.

They met Mrs. D'Eyncourt; she stopped to speak to Cecie.

"I have missed you for such a long time, you naughty puss. Where have you been?"

"With Herbert," Cecie answered.

Mrs. D'Eyncourt looked from one to the other.

"With whom, my dear?"

"With Herbert," she repeated, giving such a look into the young man's face that he felt bound to say something.

"She is to call me Herbert till she is tired of me."

"Yes?" interrogatively.

"And I'm to call her Cecie," he went

on, wishing Mrs. D'Eyncourt were not so inquisitive.

That lady was, however, determined to get to the bottom of the matter, that she might feel assured of her son's safety, so in the same tone she said that questioning "Yes?"

Mainwaring could stand it no longer; he wished his hostess and her density at the bottom of the sea, and said bluntly,

"You may congratulate us if you like."

"Oh, I'm sure I do congratulate you both most heartily; and I am sure, Sir Herbert, I need not say how pleased we shall be for you to prolong your stay indefinitely. You will want to make the acquaintance of Miss FitzAlleyn, and hear what she has to say on the subject."

"Must I?" asked Mainwaring in dismay, his face lengthening. "I did not know they would have to be consulted."

"My dear boy, how could you be so

silly ; of course you will have to consult them. There, go away and enjoy yourselves, and to-morrow I will drive you over to see them with Cecie."

Had Mrs. D'Eyncourt been pronouncing sentence of death on him, the young baronet could not have been more overcome than he was at this arrangement.

"I never dreamt of speaking to those dreadful aunts ; they will never let me off," he soliloquised.

Relinquishing his betrothed without any apparent reluctance to a partner who now appeared, Sir Herbert made his way to the supper-room, and after a fair supply of champagne to restore his courage, quietly retired for the night.

Cecie felt his total disappearance keenly. Even kind Mrs. D'Eyncourt said it was very funny of him ; but perhaps he was ill. So she went sadly to her room, feeling neither proud nor happy, and wishing

with all her heart she had the courage to give him back his ring, and regain the self-respect she had that night trampled in the dust at her feet.

CHAPTER XI.

AN ARDENT LOVER.

NEXT morning Cecie sent down word that if Mrs. D'Eyncourt would excuse her she would rather not come to breakfast, as she was very tired. The truth was that she dared not face Mainwaring before Darrell. She remembered how different Darrell's wooing had been, and she feared how Sir Herbert would behave, and wished to spare herself humiliation in the eyes of friends she prized. She determined to remain in her own room till the breakfast party would have had time to disperse, and then trust to meeting Mainwaring by

chance, so that their greeting could be got through without spectators.

Sir Herbert ate a far heartier breakfast for the non-appearance of his lady-love. It gave a fillip to his appetite, for he did not feel particularly inclined for breakfast when he first appeared. His waking thoughts had not been the serenest a man can have. He felt he had been made a fool of the night before—tricked, trapped; and though he had liked Cecie very well before, he felt he almost hated her now, and certainly despised her for the way she had netted him. He saw through it all so clearly now, and was mad with himself for being so culpably weak; but though he could see so clearly how he got into this scrape, he could not see how to get out of it.

Darrell had heard nothing of the engagement during the evening; but his mother, fearing lest he might hear it

suddenly, followed him to his room and told him gently.

He had guessed what was coming, and yet when the blow fell, it was none the less hard to bear that he had, in a measure, helped it all on. He passed a sleepless night, but rose in the morning resolved to struggle against it, and overcome his pain, now that it was impossible he could ever win her.

He found Mainwaring alone in the breakfast-room when he came down. The baronet was standing at the window, gazing moodily out into the bright garden, and it was a sullen rather than a happy face that he turned to greet Darrell.

After a few words about the weather and such like, Darrell laid his hand on his shoulder and said kindly,

“For your sake, old friend, I was glad at the news mother told me last night. I wish you every happiness old boy, though

you have gained yours at the expense of mine."

"I am awfully sorry it is so," Sir Herbert answered, wringing his friend's hand. "I wish she had taken you instead of me. Do you think she would do so now, Dal?"

"Herbert," Darrell said almost angrily, "this is too serious a subject for joking. She refused me ten days ago because she loved you best. Don't think I blame you in the matter. I thought she cared about me before she saw you; but I was mistaken. She must only have liked me all the while, and who can account for the waywardness of a woman's heart!"

"Faugh! I don't believe they have hearts. It was my title Cecie took a fancy to," the baronet said bluntly; in his bitterness blurting out the result of his night's thoughts.

Darrell started back, amazed and disgusted.

"Is that the way you speak of the woman who is to be your wife?"

"I don't know that she is going to be my wife," Sir Herbert said doggedly, and beginning to whistle under his breath.

"Let me tell you Mainwaring, you are not going to behave as you please to her while I have strength to defend her."

Darrell stepped back and gazed at his friend with a look that meant mischief.

Sir Herbert saw plain speaking would not do, unless he meant to risk an open rupture with Darrell, so he said warmly,

"Look here Dal, don't let that girl come between us, we have always been good friends; of course I was only joking, and now let's drop the subject."

Happily Mrs. D'Eyncourt entered at this moment, and prevented any further conversation; and Mainwaring had time

to reflect on his position, which seemed to him more critical than he supposed, as it was evidently impossible to attempt to shake Cecie off just yet. He listened submissively to Mrs. D'Eyncourt's plans for introducing him to the aunts, and smiled grimly to himself as she told him not to be nervous about them, as they were sure to like him,

When breakfast was nearly over, and Cecie did not appear, Ned said,

"I wonder where Cecie is."

"Asleep, I suppose," Sir Herbert rejoined.

"No, she is not well, and begged to be excused," Mrs. D'Eyncourt said.

Mainwaring went calmly on with his meal; the news evidently made no difference to him.

"I wonder you can eat and Cecie not here," Ned said mischievously.

"I don't see what difference her being here would make. She doesn't feed me."

"No; but I should have thought that, hearing she was not well, you would have shown some anxiety in the shape of messages to the invalid."

"Ought I to have done so, Mrs. D'Eyncourt?" Sir Herbert asked.

"It would have been done in my young days," she answered.

"I suppose I had better write her a note then," and Mainwaring sighed, as though he had set himself a heavy task.

As soon as the meal was over he went to the writing-table, and after two or three attempts, composed the following laconic note:

"DEAR CECIE,

"Awfully sorry you are seedy. Hope you are coming down soon. You can fancy I am anxious to see you.

"Yours sincerely,

"HERBERT MAINWARING."

He was pleased with the last sentence. "She can *fancy* I am anxious to see her if she likes, though I am not," he soliloquised, and reading his note, sent it to her room.

When it came to Cecie's hands, and she had mastered its contents, she was in nowise deceived by the semi-loving tone, and valued the last sentence at its exact worth. Then she set herself to consider how she should answer it.

Her better nature prompted her to set him free, but she soon scouted the idea as impossible.

"It will be like confessing that I tried to entrap him ; and it will be closing the only loophole of escape open to me. I must and will go through with it. I daresay we shall get on well enough by-and-by."

Reaching her writing materials, she sat down to write and answer this her first love-letter. She wrote the first words,

"Dearest Herbert," but could get no farther. A flood of thoughts crowded upon her, and, flinging down her pen, she remained long lost in sad and bitter thoughts.

"Oh!" she cried, "is this the end of all my hopes and dreams? For the sake of freeing myself from my curse I must marry a man who dislikes and despises me, and whom I—well, I don't care two pins about. Love—that one feeling which makes life endurable—is denied me. I don't love him now; and, though I may learn to do so, it may be that I shall only learn to tolerate him, or worse—to hate him! Why should I marry? Why should I not wait a little longer for my freedom? I might meet someone hereafter who would love me. Why should I sell myself in this degrading manner? In trying to free myself from one yoke, may I not be fitting another and a far more galling one to my shoulders? No; I will not marry him."

Seizing her pen she wrote rapidly :

“DEAR SIR HERBERT,

“I cannot but feel from the tone of your letter that you do not really care for me, and write now to bid you forget all that passed between us last night. I do not wish to curse myself with a husband who does not love me. I am cursed enough already——”

“Cursed enough already!” she repeated to herself, “and yet of my own free will I am increasing it. How shall I bear the savage treatment of those two women when they know what I have done? No, I will marry him. At any rate I shall be my own mistress and free of them.”

Tearing across the half-written letter, she wrote another, but slowly and with an evident effort, which showed her heart was not in her work.

“DEAR HERBERT” (it ran),

“If you really are so anxious to see me, I will meet you on the tennis lawn in an hour’s time.”

And this being duly despatched, she proceeded to dress.

CHAPTER XII.

A MODERN HECATE.

It was the last day of August, and Mrs. Waed was looking anxiously down the level drive to Treholme Park, a charming place in Moltonshire—whither she had teased her husband into going for the shooting, and their autumn trip.

Mr. Waed did not care in the least for shooting, but he did care to please his impetuous little wife; and as George Treholme was a very old friend of his, he let himself be persuaded into accepting the invitation without very much difficulty.

“It will be so nice dear!” Fanny had

said to her husband. "I know Mabel Ainsworthy is going, and Mary Treholme said George was going to ask Sir Hugh Stapylton, and a lot of other nice men."

So they went, and had been in the house nearly two days when we see Mrs. Waed gazing anxiously out from the windows of the morning-room.

"Do you see any signs yet?" asked Mrs. Treholme, who was whiling away the time with some fancy work.

"No. Yes! Here's the carriage. I do hope Mab has come," Fanny cried excitedly.

"If you mean Miss Ainsworthy, I most heartily echo your sentiments," and Sir Hugh Stapylton advanced hastily to the window to watch the rapidly-approaching carriage.

"I have been looking forward to meeting her again."

"You are not singular in that," Mrs.

Waed said, turning away to hide a smile lurking round her mouth ; “ Miss Ainsworthy does not expect to see you though.”

“ Has she interested herself enough to think about me at all ? ”

“ I expect not, but I wrote and told her you would not be here.”

“ You did ? Why ? ”

“ Mrs. Treholme told me someone could not come, and I fancied it was you, so I mentioned it when I wrote.”

“ And she—what did she say ? ” he asked eagerly.

“ Oh, I forget. Let me see—yes, I remember what it was, but I shan’t tell you ; it was never intended for you to hear.”

“ Nay, you ought to tell me Mrs. Waed ; it’s wrong to rouse a man’s curiosity unless you intend to gratify it.”

Sir Hugh’s pleasant face wore a smile of expectancy. Quick-witted Fanny Waed

saw he was waiting to hear some flattering speech, so she answered him—drumming the while on the window-pane with her dainty little fingers.

“Well, if you must know, she said, ‘You are right in saying Sir Hugh will be a loss, but I am sure Mrs. Treholme won’t be long before she finds a capital substitute.’”

Sir Hugh bit his moustache to hide his vexation.

“She was not sorry then?” he asked foolishly.

“Sorry!” and the little tormentor gave a silvery peal of laughter. “Mabel Ainsworthy sorry because she would not meet one particular man! I daresay she has forgotten you entirely, and will hardly know you again,” and as Sir Hugh turned away, she added to herself,

“If you really are trying to win our Mabel, it shan’t be my fault if you don’t

feel to the full the glory of your victory when you achieve it."

Two minutes after the carriage drove up, and Miss Ainsworthy, stepping gracefully from it into the fine old hall, was surrounded by a group of her friends, all eager to kiss her or grasp her hand.

Smiling and happy, Mabel advanced into the hall, Mrs. Waed on one side and Mrs. Treholme on the other.

"It is good to come here," she said, stooping to kiss Mrs. Treholme. "I believe you really are glad to see me."

"I should think we were. Who would not be?"

"Oh, lots of people, I daresay," Mabel said, laughing carelessly; and seeing a hand extended, she laid her own delicately-gloved one in it, murmuring the conventional "How do you do?" without noticing to whom she spoke.

Something in the warmth of the grasp

made her look upwards as she withdrew her hand. A glad light came into her eyes, and a deep flush overspread her face as she said,

“Sir Hugh!”

He had come gloomily forward to greet her, but the light in her eyes reflected itself in his, and grasping her hand once more, he said,

“Did you not know who it was at first?”

“No. I did not expect to see you. I thought you were not coming.”

“And are you glad I did?” he asked in a low voice.

For answer, she lifted her grand truthful eyes to his for one moment, and then turned away.

Fanny Waed had seen this little by-play, and made her own comments thereon.

“Bother the man! I wish I had told her he was here. He would be silly not to see how genuinely glad she was to see him, and

there's all my wholesome snubbing made of no avail. He will be fancying she's dying for him next—but he shan't do that. I'll set Dick after them." And quitting her friend's arm, she hastened away to the billiard-room.

Opening the door and glancing hastily round, she exclaimed,

"Dick, you're the very man I want."

"And you are the very woman I am always wanting," responded the person thus addressed, the Hon. Richard Challoner, as he raised himself from a divan, on which he had been lounging, and tossed away his cigar.

"Come here, I want to look at you."

"With pleasure," he answered. "I shall take the opportunity of having a good look at you the while."

"Don't be silly," she said, shaking a reproving finger at him, which he immediately caught and kissed.

“Good gracious me, think of Laura!” she said.

“Good gracious me, think of Arthur!” he returned, seizing her round the waist and kissing her.

She drew herself back angrily.

“Dick, I’ve told you a hundred times I won’t allow that, and besides, I had something of importance to say to you, but if you’re in such a mad humour it’s no good wasting my time,” and she made towards the door.

“Come now, little woman, don’t be so touchy. If you will stay and tell me this important matter, I will promise on my honour to sit on the other side of the room the whole time you are here. That will be no small sacrifice, I can assure you, for I can’t see why a fellow is given a jolly little cousin like you, unless he may derive some benefit from the relationship occasionally.”

"Well, I will forgive you," she said, seating herself on the broad window-seat. "Come and sit here."

"Willingly," he said, dropping himself beside her. "Now to return to the point we started from; you wanted to look at me."


"Yes, be quiet for a moment;" and Fanny Waed folded her little hands, and gazed steadily at the handsome face before her.

Richard Challoner was a tall well-built man, of about five-and-forty; his features were good and massive, and admirably suited to them were the well-trimmed beard and moustache, and thick clustering brown hair that waved over his broad forehead. His eyes were very fine, a deep hazel, that changed with the ever-varying feelings of his most variable nature.

It was to those eyes that Dick Challoner owed his many victories over the susceptible

female heart—to his eyes and his mouth, which had a whimsical expression ever lurking round it, that added greatly to the charm of his face. He had, too, a rich deep voice, a voice admirably adapted for the soft tender speeches for which it was principally used, though equally so for the jovial story and style of the *bon camarade*.

Richard Challoner was a dangerous man, a devoted admirer of beauty. He was always at the feet of some woman ; but so long as she came up to his standard he cared not one atom whether she were duchess or peasant, wife, widow, or maid. Where women were concerned he was utterly without principle, and fickle to a degree. His susceptible nature was rarely chained by one being for long at a time ; but each of these passions was, while it lasted, fierce and wild—stopping at nothing, caring for nothing ; every obstacle swept from the path. Woe to the woman



who attracted his fancy! she must be strong-willed and determined indeed to escape him. He would return to the attack fifty times if he thought there was the faintest chance of success; and he was revengeful. Foil him harshly, let him truly see his attentions were distasteful, and he would never forgive it, but brood sullenly over it as though he had been cruelly wronged; and though he was not by any means a wicked man—only unprincipled—let him see a chance of being even with a woman who had so treated him, and he was not the man to refuse it.

And this man was married! Married! and his wife one of the most contented women living! Truth is stranger than fiction—far. What Mrs. Challoner's early married life may have been I cannot say; but at this time she was quite accustomed to Dick's "little ways." Knew all about them—or nearly all—and cared no more

than she would have cared about the peccadilloes of the King of Dahomey.

She even made great friends of some of the women he admired ; and so long as Dick was kind and pleasant to her, never gave him a cross word or showed an atom of jealousy. Nor was this because she amused herself with admirers after her own fashion, for she was a handsome woman, and could have done so. No, she was thoroughly odd ; thought there was no one in the world like her husband, and was certainly the only woman who could have been a wife to Richard Challoner.

“ Well ! ” said Dick, when a little smile from Mrs. Waed, and the unclasping of her pretty hands, showed him the scrutiny was over.

“ You’ll do,” said Fanny enigmatically.

“ What for ? ” demanded Mr. Challoner, much mystified.

"Dick, would you do a kindness for me?"

"I would do anything for you within my capabilities."

"Would you fall in love to please me?"

"Humph! Is she nice?"

"Awfully."

"Pretty?"

"The handsomest, most divine woman you ever saw."

"'Barkis is willin.' Who is she?"

"I shan't tell you till you have heard all."

"What, is there some dark background to your picture? A lovely face with horns peeping from a cloud of golden hair, eh?"

"No, no, Dick; don't be stupid!"

"Well, tell me where she is; for unless you show me a most alluring photo, I give it up, even after your description. I don't want to leave this for a week or so yet."

"You need not ; she is here."

"In this house ? "

"Certainly."

"Then she must have concealed her charms pretty well ; for the women here, after yourself, are simply hideous old tabbies."

"She has just arrived."

"What ! here ? "

"Yes, here. How dull you are."

"Fanny, the thing is impossible. You see Laura's here, and though she never said much, she was rather annoyed about——well, someone you never heard of, and I am *bon garçon* for a time."

"Did I ever build a house on sand, Dick ? "

"You never built one at all, to my knowledge."

"How tiresome you are ! Well, what if I tell you that without Laura's aid my scheme falls to the ground ? "

She drew back to see the effect of her words; but he only said with a laugh,

“The plot thickens.”

“Yes,” she answered, “for my divinity doesn’t care a bit about men; and you must get at her through Laura, whom she will like. She’ll chat to you; but if you get spóony she’ll cut you in an instant. What I want you to do, is to make it apparent to everyone but herself, that you are devoted to one another.”

“I don’t like your game, Fanny; I don’t see much amusement for me in it.”

“Oh, but you will. No one but you could manage it. She is a woman—no girl—and a woman we all worship. She has never cared a rap about any man until now.”

“Until now! then she is in love. Upon my word Fanny——”

“Now do listen, you tiresome thing!

In love? Of course she is, or I should never have wanted your help."

"You want to pique *him* then, and I'm to be the cat's-paw. Thanks, Fanny!"

"Well, you are a cat's-paw in a certain sense," Fanny returned candidly. "But do listen to me. He is too sure of his game; he sees she cares for him, and I can't bear our——"

"Mabel," said Dick, without a change of expression.

Fanny started.

"You know whom I mean?"

"You are a very transparent little woman, Fanny; there can be but one woman over whom you would take so much trouble, and that must be your paragon Mabel. Go on."

"I've a good mind not to say another word," she said, looking vexed.

"Oh no, you've not. Let me see, you are mad that our Mabel——"

"Well, I am mad that our Mabel should be so easily won; and I want you to pay her a lot of attention, so that he shall find she is not so devoted to him as he conceitedly imagines."

"Well Fanny, I am sorry, but I am afraid I can't help you."

"Not help me!" cried Fanny, in dismay.

"No; I am not fond of appearing a fool; and paying attention to a woman who is already devotedly in love, is only wasting time and making oneself ridiculous. Besides, I have heard too much about your friend to like her. I don't like her photo; and I like her character even less. She is a cold, hard, self-opinionated, independent woman, with nothing soft or womanly about her. A woman to admire, not to love; and I like loving women better than admiring them."

Fanny broke into a peal of laughter, the clouds clearing away from her face.

“Oh Dick! if those are your only reasons for refusing, wait until you have seen her before you do refuse. She is the most lovable darling in the world. Wait till you have seen her and spoken to her, you won’t feel disposed to let that horrid Sir Hugh——”

“Sir Hugh! Do you mean Sir Hugh Stapylton? is *he* the lover?”

“Yes; do you know anything of him?”

Dick Challoner was silent a moment; an expression of fierce anger swept across his face, and starting to his feet he said,

“Know him! I should think I do. Yes, and I owe him something I would gladly repay. If he is the lover Fan, that alters the case. I will do it, and carry it through to the end, whatever that end may be.”

“Oh Dick!” cried Fanny, frightened at his vehemence, “you won’t do him any harm?”

"Not if he keeps out of my way."

"Oh Dick! don't have anything to do with it; please don't."

"Don't be silly Fanny. You have put my long hoped-for revenge within my grasp; and I'll have it, if your friend is good enough," and leaving her abruptly, he walked into the garden.

A minute later Mrs. Treholme and Mrs. Challoner entered the room.

"Where have you been, Fanny?" asked the latter. "There's a whiff of Dick's cigar about the place; have you been flirting with him?"

"Flirting, *no*; but plotting, *yes*," said Fanny gravely. She felt as though she had been stirring up a hornet's nest, and wanted to share her troubles with someone else. In a minute the story was all told, even to Dick's hoped-for revenge.

"What do you think?" asked Fanny doubtfully.

"That it will serve Sir Hugh right," said Mrs. Treholme. "Mabel is worth too much to be monopolised by any one man. I hate the idea of her being married; she will be lost."

"But surely," said Mrs. Challoner, "you don't mean to part your nice friend from the man she evidently cares about? I was so curious about her that I was watching her closely when she saw Sir Hugh, and I could read in her face how she loved him. You would not part them!"

"I would," said Mrs. Treholme.

"And I too," chimed in Fanny. "You don't know, Laura, how proud and overbearing that man is. He is so wrapped up in himself that he hardly ever deigns to look at a woman. He has been a dozen times to my 'evenings' without saying as many sentences to me, or to any other woman but Mabel. I suppose he fancies he is Paradise, and we are all Peris

clamouring to be let in ; I suppose Mab is to be the favoured being who is to squeeze through the bars ; he'll never have the courage to open the gate, for fear we all make a rush for it."

"He looked very nice to me," said Laura. "I thought him sad-looking."

"My dear, you don't know him, or you would not be so easily deceived," both ladies exclaimed. "That looking sad is artfulness. He makes us think he has had some terrible trouble, and we try to be nice to him and console him ; but the moment we assume a friendly tone he freezes up, and is almost rude."

"Well, I am willing to sit by and look on," laughed Mrs. Challoner. "But what will you two wicked people do if she falls in love with my Dick?"

"I am not afraid for Mab a bit. If you can keep Dick's heart from being broken, I think there is not much fear of Mab's

getting bruised even. She is not a bit susceptible."

"In that case I promise my help to subdue this terrible man."

"Between the three of us we are sure to succeed," said Mrs. Treholme.

"Three is a bad number," laughed Fanny. "We might be the three Graces, the three Furies, or those three horrible witches in 'Macbeth.'"

"We resemble the latter most, I think," Mrs. Challoner said gravely. "We seem likely to cause

Hubble bubble,
Toil and trouble."

CHAPTER XIII.

IS IT THE WORK OF A FRIEND ?

THE awkward quarter of an hour before dinner was announced. Everyone was assembled but Mabel Ainsworthy.

Mrs. Waed and Dick Challoner were chatting by the fireplace.

"It's no use, Fanny," he was saying, "I am sure I shan't like her. I can't bear paragons."

"I won't have you say another word till you have seen her."

"When I do, I hope, for your sake, I shall be duly impressed. By Jove——"

Mrs. Waed turned her head at the ex-

clamation, and smiled to herself, as the beautiful Mabel swept into the room, looking magnificent in a dark-green velvet dress, that clung to her perfect figure in rich folds. Rare old lace kissed her white neck and beautifully-moulded arms, and in her bosom nestled a glowing scarlet flower.

Regal she looked, and Fanny felt that her point was gained, when she glanced at Dick Challoner's enraptured face.

Slowly and reluctantly he took his eyes from Miss Ainsworthy, and answered gravely,

"She is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. And you will help me Fanny?" he said hoarsely. "I wish to heaven I had never seen her! Were I free, I would never rest till she was mine. As it is, she will send me to perdition."

"How wildly you talk," Fanny said, feeling half frightened. "I daresay you will see someone else to-morrow whom

you will eulogise in the same high-flown manner."

"You mistake me Fanny. I could not flirt with that woman. I could love her with an intensity I have never known before; but to flirt with her would be to drag her down to the level of every other woman."

"And to love her with this intensity would be to raise her above their level?" Fanny said sarcastically.

"In my eyes, yes," he said quietly. "You are her friend—introduce me."

"Will it be the work of a friend to do so?" Fanny asked timidly.

"That is for you to decide afterwards," he answered, and giving Fanny his arm, crossed the room to the sofa whereon sat Mabel and her hostess.

"Mabel dear, I want to introduce you to a cousin of mine."

Mabel bowed and smiled, and a moment

later Dick Challoner was chatting to her.

She talked to him without much interest. Her thoughts were evidently far away, and Dick Challoner fancied he caught her glances straying to the other side of the room, where Sir Hugh Stapylton was conversing merrily with a pretty girl—Amy Vaughan by name.

Dick felt savage at the indifference with which he was treated.

"Miss Vaughan is very pretty," he said.

Mabel raised her eyebrows.

"Miss Vaughan?"

"Yes, the girl you are looking at."

"Was I looking at her? Yes, she is pretty—something like a wax doll. It's rather a vapid face."

"Sir Hugh does not seem to take your view of her," Dick said maliciously. "By the way, do you know him?"

"I have met him before."

"I should not fancy he was the sort of man you would care about—too cold and reserved."

"I have not found him either."

"*Ergo* you like him?"

"You seem to interest yourself strangely in my whims and caprices," she said, glancing at him with an angry gleam in her eyes.

"I do," Dick answered calmly.

Dinner was announced. Challoner had the coveted honour of taking Miss Ainsworthy, and flattered himself he should have a fair opportunity of fascinating her. "L'homme propose mais Dieu dispose." On her other hand was seated Sir Hugh.

From being cold and haughty, Challoner found his companion suddenly become smiling, brilliant, and tenfold more fascinating than she had been before.

"This is indeed an unhopèd-for pleasure,"

Sir Hugh said as they were seated.
"I longed to come and speak to you before dinner, but you never looked near me, and I did not dare."

"I should not have thought you lacking in courage."

"Many brave men have become cowards under the fire of a woman's eyes."

"And yet Miss Vaughan did not appear terrible to me."

"Miss Ainsworthy, you are too bad! Long ago you forbade compliments unless I wished to lie under the ban of your displeasure, and yet you say the most provoking things. You know I meant that men only became cowards under the fire of eyes they cared for."

Mabel laughed carelessly, and turned away to reply to a remark of Mr. Challoner's.

Presently Sir Hugh said,

"I am so glad you have come."

"Are you?" she said frankly. "I am glad to hear you say so. It is pleasant to feel that one is welcome."

"You welcome!" he said, in a deeply tender tone. "Your presence brings light and sunshine into every house you enter."

"A very pretty sentiment, which I most heartily endorse," Dick Challoner interposed.

Mabel looked round, half vexed.

"Oh, you heard it?"

"Certainly. My hearing is acute; though, if you wish it, I will make it less so."

Mabel cast a look of scorn at him; but he effected his purpose. For the rest of dinner she talked almost exclusively to him.

CHAPTER XIV.

SCORNED.

A FORTNIGHT had slipped away, and the fact was patent to everyone but the object of his attachment that Dick Challoner was madly in love with Miss Ainsworthy. To no one more fully so than his wife.

“Aren’t you jealous, Mrs. Challoner?” someone asked her.

“Jealous! No. I am glad to see Dick enjoying himself.”

It seemed truly so, for she showed a warm liking for Mabel on her own account, and was perpetually trying to throw the two together.

Mabel fully returned Mrs. Challoner's friendship, but in a kind of pitying spirit. She thought Dick a pleasant nice man for an acquaintance; but as a husband she thought he must be simply unendurable, and that the unfortunate who shared his name ought to rank as General in the army of domestic martyrs.

She had been angry with Dick at first; but despite herself she could not help liking him. There was a joviality and a daring kind of impudence about him that threw down the wall of coldness and reserve she had been at such pains to build up; and she frankly acknowledged that she liked him, and was glad when he was with her. That he loved her she never for one moment imagined. Her heart was filled with but one image, and there was no room even for the shadow of any other. Mabel Ainsworthy loved Sir Hugh with the whole strength and

passion of her nature ; and, like a northern summer, her love was but the fiercer and warmer for being so long ice-bound.

“ All men besides are to me like shadows ” she could truly have said ; and what wonder that, with her heart throbbing with this new great love, she did not see or think of any danger that could lie in her being pleasant with Dick Challoner.

Sir Hugh saw things more clearly. He fumed over Challoner’s attentions, and even at times doubted whether Mabel did not encourage them ; but he never put an end to his fears, and spoke his love.

Matters stood thus, when one morning George Treholme was much put out to find his shooting-party was to be minus its most important member. He was no sportsman himself, but owned some of the finest shooting in the county ; and

these parties were a great bore to him unless he had someone with him on whom to let his mantle descend, and who would free him from the duties of host and let him stroll about the place, arranging things and looking after his property.

Dick Challoner was his mainstay, he was a thorough sportsman—fishing, shooting, hunting, he enjoyed each in its turn, and welcomed each fresh season with genuine pleasure. Fond as he was of female society, he could even forego that for a good day's sport.

So safe was Mr. Treholme in having him about, that he laid his plans from day to day quite independent of the shooting. On this morning he and Mr. Waed were to ride to the market-town to look at some cattle that were to be sold. Imagine then Mr. Treholme's consternation when he heard Dick announce,

“I shan't shoot to-day.”

"Not shoot!" said his host aghast. "Why, my dear fellow, only last evening you were quite enthusiastic about shooting over Lowmoor Copse. A cover that has not been drawn yet. You can't mean it?"

"I do indeed."

"But why in the name of fortune?"

"Because that kind but most fickle lady has turned her wheel, and permitted me to spend my day in rarer and more enjoyable amusements. If you want to know more I must refer you to Miss Ainsworthy."

"To me! You are labouring under a delusion. I have not the faintest idea how you mean to spend your day."

"Is it possible you have forgotten so soon?"

"I think you half promised to ride with me this morning," said Sir Hugh, leaning anxiously across the table.

"Miss Ainsworthy would not have done so, considering she wholly promised to let me drive her in the pony phaeton," Dick said audaciously.

"I——!" Mabel began, looking utterly astonished, but ere she could speak Sir Hugh had risen from the table; his face clouded, his voice angry as he said,

"In that case I had better withdraw my claim."

Scarcely had the door closed on him than Mabel exclaimed angrily,

"Mr. Challoner, how could you, how dare you tell such an abominable fib?"

He rose and went to her side. "Don't be angry," he said in low eager tones; "I wanted to have you all to myself for a little time, so I made a bold stroke for it. You will go with me, you won't refuse me?"

"I think you have behaved very badly,

and I shall certainly not go with you," she said half laughing.

"Don't be so cruel," he pleaded, bringing his handsome face on a level with her own, and gazing at her with all the fascination of his fine eyes. "I have longed for a cosy little chat with you. It will seem so unkind if you don't go."

"Nonsense," she said, laughing nervously, and feeling as though she could not refuse him while his eyes were bent on hers. "You can take someone else."

"Do you think anyone else would suffice when I want you?" he said in a tone that was in itself a caress.

Mabel could not bear it. She rose from the table and said firmly,

"Mr. Challoner, I will not go with you."

Catching a sorrowful expression on his face she paused, and turning to Mrs. Challoner, who was sitting near, asked,

“Will you go?”

A bright smile crossed Dick's face.

“Of course, Laura will go. And the ponies will be round in half an hour; don't keep them waiting, either of you.”

In perfect good faith Mabel went to dress.

Dick had a little confabulation with his wife, which ended in her going into the garden with Fanny Waed; and then he sauntered to the stables to watch the lovely little pair of brown ponies being put to.

By-and-by he tooled them round to the door; and in a few minutes Mabel appeared, looking so handsome, so high-bred, but so thoroughly resolute, that Dick trembled for the success of his scheme.

Mabel had been taking herself to task during the period of dressing for allowing

Mr. Challoner to be so *empresé* in his manner, and had determined for the future to keep him very much at his distance.

Slowly she descended the few broad steps, and began patting the ponies' glossy sides.

"Where is Mrs. Challoner?" she said at last.

"I don't know at all," he answered, with the utmost *sang-froid*.

"I thought she was coming with us," Miss Ainsworthy said quietly.

"She went down the garden with Mrs. Waed, and has not come back."

"I am sorry," said Mabel, beginning to remount the steps, "for I rather looked forward to a drive this morning."

"Why can't you have one?" he asked, in well-feigned surprise.

She was silent; he began to laugh.

"You are surely not going to refuse to drive with me because my wife is

not here? I did not think that you of all women were a prude, Miss Ainsworthy."

"I am not," she said, turning and facing him.

"Then come with me."

"No, I can't; because——"

"Because you are one," he said, giving the ponies a furious cut with the whip, that made them plunge and rear madly.

"Don't punish those poor little brutes because you are offended with me," she said, scornfully.

"Offended! Nay, you should say hurt—cut. You have balked me of a morning's enjoyment, because you don't think me whip enough to drive these miserable little rats."

"No, no; it's not that."

"What then can it be? If you do not fear my overturning the carriage, what can you fear? I am not an ogre; I shall not eat you."

"You are absurd, Mr. Challoner."

"It must be then that you do not like me well enough to spend a few hours with me. Rather than that you should lose your drive, I will fetch Sir Hugh."

"Enough, Mr. Challoner," she said haughtily, "I will go," and she seated herself in the pretty phaeton, drew the rug round her, and in a moment more the little steeds, impatient from their long waiting, had sprung from the groom's hands, and flown off at a spanking rate to the lodge gates.

Neither spoke for the first couple of miles, and then Dick said,

"I should like to know why you refused to drive with me. I know why you accepted."

"Why?" asked Mabel.

"Because you were piqued at what I said about Sir Hugh. I can read every line of your face with perfect ease."

"Really," Mabel answered, indifferently, though the mention of Sir 'Hugh's name had set her wondering over his sudden disappearance from the breakfast-table. Her companion recalled her to the present, by saying in a jesting tone,

"Does it take so very long to consider whether you can tell me?"

"I really was not giving the matter a thought. I did not wish to drive with you—without your wife," Mabel said, determined to silence him.

"Why not without my wife?" he asked, gazing at her earnestly.

Miss Ainsworthy did not answer.

"Was it because you dared not trust yourself with me, for fear I should find out the truth?"

"I do not understand you," Mabel said haughtily, endeavouring to conceal her nervousness.

Dick brought the ponies to a slow walk,

and letting the reins hang loosely on their necks, bent over Mabel; his face full of such intense passion, that, strong woman as she was, she felt awed and frightened.

“You do not understand. Listen to me, and let me make it clear to you. No, hear me before you speak, and then I will listen with my very soul, to the melody of your divine voice. Since the first time I saw you, you have been the one thought of my mind; sleeping and waking, your image has been ever before me. Your heart cannot be cold to such idolatry as mine. It must, it does respond. Oh, what a future lies before us!” and seizing her hands, he smothered them with wild kisses.

Indignation and horror had kept Mabel transfixed, as he poured out his wild protestations, but at his touch she recovered her self-possession, and dragging away her hands, cried,

“Good heavens, Mr. Challoner, you must be mad, or if sane, one of the basest men living. Do you know what you have dared to say; how you have dared to insult me? Do you know——”

“I know nothing but that I love you!” he said, gazing ardently at her.

“Love!” Mabel cried, her whole face ablaze with indignation. “Love! Never dare to desecrate that sacred word, by applying it to such a vile passion as yours. You, a married man, who have yourself striven to make me like your wife—come to me and dare to tell me you love me! I honour your wife; but you—— I liked you before because you amused me; but now—I loathe you.”

“My love! my love!” he cried, like one stricken with a mortal blow.

“Oh heaven!” she cried passionately, “that this man should use such words to me.” Then turning on him fiercely, she

said: "Were I a man I would shoot you, like the hound that you are; but I can have no outward vengeance, but I vow that I will never willingly address one word to you again," and leaning forward, she strove to reach the reins.

He caught her hands, and forced her to look at him. She was half startled at the changed expression of his face. All the love light had died from his eyes, and in its place burned a fierce fire of rage.

"Mabel Ainsworthy," he said, "I have heard your vow, now hear mine. You have scorned and trampled on my love ruthlessly. I could have borne a gentle refusal, for I should have felt that that would one day be revoked, but scorn I cannot bear; and I swear that I will make you ask on your very knees for the love you now so scornfully thrust from you. I have sworn it."

And turning the ponies round, he drove rapidly homewards.

Strong and self-reliant as was her nature, Mabel felt herself weak and trembling before this terrible trial, and on reaching the house she hastily made her way to her own room, there to sob out her humiliation with those agonising heart-wrung sobs whose pain only strong-natured women feel.

She was so weak, so pitifully weak. In the midst of her grief one thought was ever present with her, bringing a sharp pain to her heart, and a dusky flush to her cheek.

“Should Sir Hugh know, what would he say? What would he think? Would he blame her?”

She blamed herself for caring in the least what any man thought of her. What was Sir Hugh more to her than any other man, that she should let his good or bad opinion

be a matter of anxiety to her? But the words rose to her lips, the first confession even to herself of the truth: "I cannot help it. I love him—I love him."

CHAPTER XV.

WAE'S ME!

MISS AINSWORTHY did not reappear til dinner-time, and then she looked so pale and ill that on every side she was plied with inquiries and sympathy.

“Had you an accident, Dick?” asked Mr. Treholme maliciously, half hoping that he had, as a revenge for his own spoilt day.

Dick paused, and looked down the table at Miss Ainsworthy before he answered; but seeing her stern impassive glance, he said boldly,

“No; we had no accident. The ponies

took fright and bolted ; the only harm done—and that perhaps the worst that could have happened—was the alarm they caused Miss Ainsworthy."

In the chorus of condolence that followed, only one person noticed the glance of supreme scorn Miss Ainsworthy flashed at Dick Challoner ; only one person refrained from inquiries or sympathy—and that person was Sir Hugh Stapylton.

"I should have thought your nerves were too strong to be upset by such a thing," said Fanny Waed.

"That was my opinion also," Mabel vouchsafed dryly.

The three plotters exchanged glances, and by that code of signals which exists in female freemasonry, each said to the other,

"Dick's been offending her."

As soon as dinner was over, and she could safely manage it, Mabel slipped away from the ladies, and throwing a light shawl

round her shoulders, went out into the balmy moonlight night, to strive to calm her troubled mind.

Nature always brought solace to her in her saddest moments. There was that in the calm, patient, uncomplaining attitude of Nature that made her own sorrows sink into insignificance, and become like the peevish complainings of a sick child. She noted the way the wind and the rain beat alike on tall tree and lowly fern, and how patiently all bowed their heads to it and bore it, till, by-and-by, the rain would cease or the wind abate, and they would raise themselves again, and as they rustled their leaves and turned towards the sun, seem to smile their thanks to Heaven for the storm that was past.

She passed from the garden into a charming little wild bit of wood that lay beyond, and there lost all the painful thoughts that had been harassing her, in

the peaceful stillness, the perfect rest everything was enjoying. Not a bird twittered, not a twig stirred. Here and there the moonlight glittered softly through the interlacing trees, slid down their boles caressingly, and stooped to love a tiny floweret that nestled at the roots, which half opened its sleepy eye at the moon's cold kiss to see if the day had come, waved its leaves lovingly as the moon, whispering, bade her sleep in her arms, and slept once more, crooning a love-song with the soft rustle of its tiny branches.

Then, through the deep stillness, broke the plaintive song of the nightingale. To-night his tale seemed so full of woe that it could not be sung in the sunshine amid the flowers, but only when all others slept could he ease his heart of its burden and pour forth his plaint on the stilly air,

“Oh Cynthia, how long must I love thee thus in vain? Wilt thou never turn to

me ? Thus, when the night closes around, do I sing to thee of my love. When other birds are gay I sit silent. I will sing the praises of none but thee ; wilt thou be ever thus cold and silent ? ”

But Cynthia passed him as he sat on the twig mourning, saying as she went :

“ Ever and for ever ; my love is given to the flowers that close their fairy petals as I approach. Never, ah never, will they give their love to me, and never, never, can I love thee.”

The nightingale took wing, silent and sad, and all again was still.

Suddenly Mabel was startled by the sound of a man's approaching footsteps. She drew aside in the shade of the trees, fearful that it should be Dick Challoner following her. The step approached nearer ; how she regretted her folly in going out alone ; she dreaded another scene like the one of the morning. The man came

abreast of her, and in the moon-gleams she saw it was not the man she dreaded, but Sir Hugh.

She advanced into the light, calling him by name. He threw away the cigar he had been smoking, and turned towards her.

"I did not know whom I might be about to encounter," she said, "so drew into the shade till I could see whether it was friend or foe."

"Then by your advancing when you saw me, I may reckon myself a friend," he answered. "I am glad, for I feared by some unwitting act I had forfeited your esteem."

"Why?" she asked.

"You seemed to avoid my society, and to prefer Mr. Challoner."

"Bah! Pray never mention that man to me again. Will you give me your arm? Thanks. I came out to try and lose a most

distressing headache, and, as I have done so, I think I will go in."

"Stay a little longer. I had no idea I should meet you when I too strolled out in no very peaceful mood; but, as we have met, will you not prolong your ramble a little?"

Mabel consented willingly, and they walked on for a while conversing, in the old friendly way, of pictures, books, and things of common interest to both. They turned and were nearing the gate that led to the garden when he said,

"May I really consider that you are not offended with me?"

"Certainly. Whatever made you think I was so?"

"You have seemed so determined to shun me lately. I have never had an opportunity of enjoying a minute's conversation without Mrs. Waed, our hostess,

or Mrs. Challoner, immediately joining us, and I thought by your desire."

"Oh no; you are quite mistaken. They are all three very fond of me I believe, and don't like me to be a moment away from one or other of them."

"Then will you give me a peace-offering of that rose you wear, to assure me that all is well?"

"No; I will give you no peace-offering, for that would be admitting there had been war."

"Nevertheless I still crave it, to convince me that I have not lost what little place I may have gained in your regard."

"Very well," she said, "I am quite willing to prove that to you. Which shall I give you?"

"That rich red one," he said.

Laughing, she unfastened it, and, putting it in his hand, said,

"I feel quite magnanimous, giving you a half-dead rose."

He took it from her hand and pressed it to his lips ; then, taking a note-case from his pocket, said,

"I will place it beside my other treasures."

Mabel's face flushed, and, stretching out her hand to take the flower from him, she said passionately,

"I must beg you to return it, Sir Hugh. You shall not place a gift of mine with the spoils of your other flirtations."

"Look at them," he said, putting the case in her hands.

There, lying before her, were a glove, the one she had missed the night of Mrs. Waed's at-home ; some flowers she had worn a day or two ago, and dropped from being insecurely fastened ; and a tiny rough sketch she had made and thrown aside.

She could not speak, but returned the case in silence.

"Is it possible," he said, "that you would have thought me capable of placing a gift of yours beside that of any other woman? Would it have pained you if I had?"

She half raised her eyes and then dropped them, while a crimson flush overspread her face.

He was silent a moment, and then broke forth passionately,

"Oh Mabel! if I only dare speak to you—if I only dare tell you all I think, all I feel for you. Tell me, if I could, should you have cared about me?"

"What do you mean?" Mabel asked, her face pale as death.

"That I cannot speak to you. That I am not free."

"And I—oh God! I love you," Mabel cried in her despair.

There was silence for a time, then he took her cold hands in his, and murmured low,

“Oh Mabel, I hoped it was not so, while I feared it might be. I have tried to keep away from you, but I could not; you have been the one gleam of sunshine in my sad life. I have been very cruel, very wicked; but say you forgive me, and do not refuse me your friendship. If you knew all the story of my misfortune you would forgive me. Oh tell me that you will?”

Slowly the words came,

“I—forgive you.”

Silence again.

She raised her head, and their eyes met; hers full of deep anguish, and his burning with such intense love, that, as they lighted on hers, they seemed to draw her whole soul out to him; and, stretching out her white arms to him, she cried in heart-broken tones,

“Oh Hugh! Hugh!”

In an instant his arms were round her, his lips pressed on hers with wild, passionate kisses; then suddenly she broke from him, and holding his face in her hands, she gazed long and earnestly into his troubled eyes, and turning swiftly she left him.

CHAPTER XVI.

STRICKEN.

THE next day Mabel Ainsworthy was very ill. Brain-fever the doctor said, and looked grave as he spoke of her.

"I should fancy she had sustained a severe mental shock," he said; "I suppose none of you ladies are in her secrets?"

The ladies addressed, Mrs. Treholme, Mrs. Waed, and Mrs. Challoner, reddened and gave a furtive guilty glance at each other; but said with one voice,

"We have not the slightest idea what can have caused this illness."

"Some *affaire du cœur*" was the doctor's

mental comment, "and they know all about it," and he took his leave.

Once alone, their tongues were loosed.

"It's Dick," said Mrs. Challoner complacently. "Of course she could not help falling in love with him, and being fond of me and a high-minded woman, it upset her. Poor Dick! it's a pity he is such a handsome fellow."

"Yes, it's undoubtedly the work of your precious Dick. I wish I had never helped to throw them together. Mabel of all women to come to this! I expect we have succeeded in making her an unhappy woman for the rest of her days!"

"Don't say that!" said Fanny with tears in her eyes. "It was all my doing, and if she dies I shall have murdered her. I am convinced something happened yesterday, for see how ill she looked after the drive, and how fearfully cross Dick was all the rest of the day."

“Poor Dick!” sighed Mrs. Challoner.

“Poor Mabel!” chorused the others.

“Poor Dick,” when he heard the sad news, smiled complacently to himself, as he soliloquised :

“She does love me then, I thought she did; I felt convinced all those high-flown sentiments were worth nothing,” and he went amongst the rest of the guests deploring the accident that had unstrung Miss Ainsworthy’s nerves.

One man went amongst them with a stern set face, and restless anxious manner. Nowhere could he find rest but in pacing the corridor outside Miss Ainsworthy’s door, and asking eagerly for news, every time anyone emerged from the sick-room.

“God spare her, and forgive me,” was the constant cry of his heart.

CHAPTER XVII.

NO ESCAPE.

A CARRIAGE was driving up to the noble stone portico of Sibthorp Manor.

In it were gentle-faced Mrs. D'Eyncourt, Cecie, who kept flushing and paling as they approached their destination, and Sir Herbert Mainwaring, looking sullen and anything but satisfied with his present position.

Within all was bustle and confusion ; as the carriage came in sight a cigar end was flung into the coal vase, a pastille lit, a French novel thrust into an ottoman from whence some work was dived for, and when

the visitors were ushered in, Maud and Lyn FitzAlleyn looked the picture of domesticity—Maud holding a skein of wool which Lyn was deftly winding.

“How delighted we are to see you dear Mrs. D'Eyncourt,” gushed Lyn. “This is a charming surprise; I am sure you came to see after the poor invalid, and I know you will be glad to find her so much better, and—yes—surely we have had the pleasure—yes—it must be Sir Herbert Mainwaring,” and with a winning smile she extended her hand.

Sir Herbert bent over it with a trifle less of sulkiness on his face, Lyn FitzAlleyn was very fascinating and not so vulgar as he had thought her. Maud wisely remembering Lyn's advice, refrained from saying much, and lowered her somewhat strident voice considerably.

For some minutes they all sat chatting in a desultory way; and then Mrs. D'Eyn-

court—only too willing to be kind and considerate where her own sons were not concerned—rose, and taking Cecie by the arm said,

“Now, darling, will you show me your pretty garden?” And, smiling to the two ladies, she added, “Sir Herbert wishes to have a little talk with you, so I am sure you will excuse us.”

As they left the room dead silence fell on the three remaining; the closing of the door sounded to Sir Herbert like a death-knell. The sisters at first exchanged delighted glances; but as the moments flew by and he was still silent they changed to angry impatience and blank dismay.

Lyn sat pondering how she could broach the delicate subject without appearing to do so, when the silence was broken by Maud.

“Sir Herbert,” she said, and paused. In

that pause she gazed at her sister ; and, utterly disregarding the hushing-down expression in her face, went on : “ You wanted to speak to us, I believe ? ”

“ No, madam ; indeed I did not,” he said candidly ; and again there was silence.

Maud for once, was utterly subdued ; but Lyn, seeing the exigencies of the case, felt it incumbent on her to make a struggle for the general good.

“ I thought,” she said sweetly, “ that dear Mrs. D'Eyncourt said that you wanted to consult us about—some ferns.”

“ Oh, not about Cecie ? ” said the baronet unguardedly, inexpressibly relieved to find they knew nothing, and never dreaming he had checkmated himself.

“ About Cecie ! ” both ladies chorused. Then Maud, in the severe tones she had been saving for the occasion, said,

“ If you have anything to say about

Miss De Vere pray say it at once. I cannot understand her allowing you to use her christian-name on such a short acquaintance."

"I've a right to do so," he said sullenly, feeling himself in for it.

"A right! What right?"

"I asked her to marry me, and she accepted."

"Subject to our approval of course," said Maud.

"Subject to the approval of her proper guardians," Sir Herbert answered angrily.

"And are we not her proper guardians?" demanded Maud.

"Not if Miss De Vere's statement be correct, that you are only the ladies under whose care she has been placed by her uncle."

"She told you we were not related to her?" said Maud, paling as though she had received a blow.

"She did," he answered, watching her narrowly.

"Neither are we," Lyn interposed quickly, instantly grasping the difficulties of the situation. "She has always called us aunts since she was a wee, wee bairnie. We knew her mother very well, and she begged us to look after the child; but in a matter of importance like this we should of course refer you to Sir Hugh Stapylton."

"Stapylton! Oh, I know him. What relation may he be?"

Both sisters flushed; but Lyn replied steadily,

"Her uncle. I am sure he will raise no objections; so, though we have no authority, we can confidently say you may consider yourself engaged to Cecie."

"You are very good," he answered coldly—and there was another long silence, which

was broken by the entrance of Cecie and Mrs. D'Eyncourt.

In that silence, Lyn, whose wits had been sharpened by contact with the rough side of the world, comprehended the whole situation. She saw Sir Herbert had been caught in a trap, and though she admired Cecie's precocious skill, she nevertheless saw rocks ahead of which Cecie was quite unconscious; she saw that Sir Herbert did not intend to carry out the engagement into which he had been forced; and to prevent this catastrophe must be her care.

When Cecie and Mrs. D'Eyncourt entered she rose, and extending her arms, folded Cecie to her heart, murmuring softly—but loud enough for Sir Herbert to hear,

“My darling child, let me congratulate you. It is all so sudden, that I hardly

know what to say, but I feel confident you will be happy."

In moments of strong excitement nature will assert herself, defeating art with bloodshed, and routing her utterly. An Irishman, a Scotchman, or provincial, however carefully he may conceal his brogue or accent, even so well as to pass for an Englishman, will, in moments of emotion, be carried out of himself, and revert to his mother tongue.

Even so it was with Maud. She felt it incumbent on her to say something congratulatory, and in her elation forgot all Lyn's admonitions, and advancing to Cecie and giving her a hearty slap on the shoulder, said,

"Bless you, you young cuss!"

Had a bomb-shell been thrown amongst them, it could not have caused greater consternation.

Cecie shrank back, and Lyn and Mrs. D'Eyncourt stood speechless, the one in horror, the other with disgust.

Sir Herbert took the matter differently; his ill-tempered apathy was roused to indignation, and snatching up his hat, said,

"I am sure, madam, I ought to thank you in Cecie's name, for your most objectionable congratulations. You will pardon me if I am undesirous of hearing more of them;" and he strode out of the room and house.

"What an ill-tempered young man!" exclaimed Miss FitzAlleyn.

"You're a fool," said Lyn angrily. "Can't you keep your vulgarity down for one minute?"

"Vulgarity be——" Maud began; but checked herself, and said, "I hardly spoke a word till then."

“Why did you not hold your tongue altogether?” Lyn went on; her asperity for once rousing her out of her wonted silvery tones. “If anything happens, you will have yourself to thank for it.”

“Anything happens——” Maud began, but Lyn silenced her with a stamp of her foot.

“At any rate, hold your tongue now,” and at that, Maud, incensed beyond measure, rose and bounced out of the room, her face scarlet with passion, the very ribbons of her *Mère Angot* cap bristling with fury.

Mrs. D'Eyncourt had been an astonished spectator of the whole scene. She had glanced over at Cecie, and perceived from the girl's downcast troubled face, that such altercations were of no uncommon occurrence.

She rose and took her leave; and, as

the brougham-door closed on them, kissed Cecie's wistful face, whispering soothingly,

"Poor child, poor child. I do indeed pity you for being obliged to live with such people. I can't think what your uncle is about to leave you with them. Still, it will soon be over now, and you have always the comfort of knowing you don't really belong to them."

"Belong to them?" Cecie asked vaguely.

"Yes, that you are not related to them. When you are Lady Mainwaring you will, of course, cut them."

"Oh yes, yes," Cecie answered eagerly, flushing hotly as she spoke. "As you say, it would be a comfort to know they are nothing to me." Then with a sudden accession of passionate eagerness she seized Mrs. D'Eyncourt's hand, and cried,

"Dear Mrs. D'Eyncourt, after what you

have seen can you wonder I am unhappy ? Could you wonder if I turned out ever so badly, with that example always before me ? It has made me wicked, made me what I am. I have never had a chance or I might have been so different. Say you believe me, and if ever you hear bad things said of me, pity me before you blame me."

"My dear child, you must not talk in this wild way. You would have me fancy you have done something very wrong. I do pity you with all my heart, child ; but I love you all the more that with all this to contend with, your own innate goodness has come to the surface."

"Don't, oh don't. I am not good. You don't know how wicked I am."

"Hush my child. I won't let you talk like this. You wicked ! Why dear, you don't know yet what sin means."

Cecie said no more, but sat silently back in her corner ; and Mrs. D'Eyncourt began to have serious apprehensions that if the girl were not soon removed from her surroundings she would go out of her mind.

She had scarcely been an hour in the house before Sir Herbert sought her in her little snugery.

"Mrs. D'Eyncourt," he said excitedly, "this must be off."

"My dear boy, it must be more on than ever."

"Why?" he demanded fiercely. "Nobody can force me to marry a girl like that."

"You can have nothing to say against her."

"Nothing, when she——"

Sir Herbert checked himself. He was too much of a man and a gentleman to

say how he had been fooled, and continued tamely, "when she has relatives like that!"

"But they are not her relatives; and I tell you this, if she goes back to them she will lose her reason. She has been talking in the wildest way about them, and I have been wishing to see you to tell you that you ought to get her uncle's consent at once, and fix the wedding for a very early date."

"Indeed Mrs. D'Eyncourt, I could not——"

"Pray hear me out. I know you would suggest that dear Cecie might object to the affair being so hurried, but I will soon smooth that difficulty away."

"Of that I have no doubt," the young man said dryly; but Mrs. D'Eyncourt continued without heeding him:

"I will do all I can to help you; and

I have been thinking that if the wedding is to come off soon, I will keep her with me until the event, and thus remove her from the evil influence of those women."

Sir Herbert was in despair. Was Mrs. D'Eyncourt even in the plot for his destruction? He was resolved not to lose his liberty without a struggle.

"You are too kind, Mrs. D'Eyncourt, but indeed I am not in any hurry. In truth, I would rather the marriage were put off for some long time. How can we tell whether we should agree—whether we should live together happily? Marriage is an awful thing to enter on hurriedly."

Mrs. D'Eyncourt rose from her seat and confronted him angrily.

"May I ask what you meant when you spoke to her of love?"

"I never did," he began; then seeing an expression of indignation sweeping over

Mrs. D'Eyncourt's face, he corrected himself, and said sullenly, "I meant all right enough, only I did not think I should be forced to take the girl at once."

Mrs. D'Eyncourt flushed.

"Sir Herbert, those are not proper words to use. Nobody is forcing you to take Cecie; you proposed of your own free will."

"Did I!" he ejaculated.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing, nothing, I made no remark."

"Then," she continued, "since you proposed of your own free will, what possible objections can you have to a speedy wedding? You are a strange lover."

"Yes, I am an odd fellow, altogether. I am afraid now that I might not make Cecie happy," he said, brightening a little with hope.

Her words crushed him once more.

“Of that I have no doubt; you are a gentleman, and a well-disposed fellow, and a girl might safely trust her future to a man possessed of those qualifications.”

“You do me too much honour,” he said, turning away to hide his disappointment.

“But we have not as yet arrived at your objections to the wedding,” Mrs. D'Eyncourt pursued.

“If I may speak candidly to you, I will tell you. You see, when a fellow is young, he likes to enjoy himself. You agree. Well, a bachelor can enjoy life, a married man can't.”

“And those are your opinions?” she asked coldly.

“My candid opinions; and now I think you can see why I object to the marriage.”

“Would you mind favouring me with

your opinions with regard to Cecie?" Mrs. D'Eyncourt asked scornfully.

"With regard to Cecie—well you see, a fellow may meet a girl whom he rather fancies; and though he may not want to marry her at once, he still perhaps does not want any other fellow to have her, so he secures her, and puts her by."

There was a pause. He had hoped by this seeming confidence to get Mrs. D'Eyncourt on his side; but the austere expression of her face showed him that he had gone too far, and he tried to assume a carelessness he was far from feeling. At last she said:

"Herbert Mainwaring, you are a scoundrel!"

"Mrs. D'Eyncourt!" he exclaimed, starting to his feet.

"Yes," she said fiercely; "I can see

through all this. You would engage Cecie's affections while it suits you, and when you are tired of her throw her aside like a worn-out glove."

He did not answer, but could not meet her clear, angry eyes.

"Do you suppose I shall allow you to behave like this?"

"Indeed, Mrs. D'Eyncourt, you mistake——"

"I hope I have mistaken you. I do you the justice to trust I have. But let me assure you, that if I have not I shall take upon myself the guardianship of this girl, and use the force of which you have already complained."

"I only wanted a year's respite—I mean engagement," he said, driven from one port of safety to the other, and now seeing nothing for him but surrender. "As you think it desirable,

I will consent to any day you choose to name."

"That is hardly a proper way to put it," she said.

Sir Herbert rose.

"I beg your pardon if it is not so. I am forced into a marriage I am unwilling to contract, and I cannot and will not pretend that the idea is anything but distasteful to me," and he left the room.

END OF VOL. I.







